

Why Millennials are Leaving the Church:
A qualitative study analyzing multiple factors contributing to the decline in Millennial
engagement within the Church

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to analyze Millennial responses towards the Church, and their decisions to leave the Church institution or religion as a whole. Previous literature that discusses statistical findings suggests that Millennials are the least likely to attend Church, or to participate in religion. The unaffiliated group categorized as, “Nones,” is on the rise within the United States and it represents the religiously unaffiliated. Unlike previous generations where those that left religion or the Church institution eventually returned after marriage and children, Millennials are predicted to be less likely to return to Church once they have gotten married and had children. Therefore, qualitative data was collected across multiple focus groups ranging from 4-10 participants per group that discussed questions on Millennials views of the Church, religion, institutions, authenticity, and spiritual wounds. This data was analyzed and coded and can be used to provide a clearer perspective on the views Millennials hold towards these issues. For the purpose of this study, the most significant issues that were focused on within this paper are that of spiritual wounds through exclusion from the Church, Millennials attitudes towards the Church, and the critique that the Church lacks authenticity.

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INTRODUCTION

When I worked as a research assistant with Dr. Randall Reed at the Wild Goose Festival in the summer of 2015, there were several Millennials that felt wounded by the Church, and therefore left the Church and found solace in other communities. One in particular described how she was excluded from the church due asking tough theological questions to her church community, which they were unwilling to answer or entertain, and thus pushed her out of the community. There was another Millennial who described how she felt excluded and ostracized from her church community because of her affiliation with the LGBTQ+ community. There are additional examples of Millennials from that festival that also felt hurt emotionally and spiritually by the church, and thus decided to ultimately leave the Church, and some even go as far as leaving the religion altogether.

What inspired me to do this research was my experience in a church in my hometown within their youth group. I strongly disliked the youth group experiences, as I felt they made it into an outlet for young adults to hang out and still get some exposure to this Jesus Christ character found within the Bible. I was discontent because they had most of their gather focused on worship and announcements of the fun activities the youth group would be doing in the coming days or weeks. They filled the time with jokes, sometimes games, or interactive worship songs. This would continue for over 45 minutes following the pizza and drinks you were required to pay a couple dollars for in order to partake in during the gathering. It would then move on to small groups of about 5-10 people for 15-20 minutes. Most of that allotted time would be used to catch up on each other's weeks, and then the last 5-10 minutes would be spent on whatever scripture was assigned for that day. Afterwards,

everyone would be dismissed to go home. This experience made me strongly dislike youth group as I viewed it as too focused on entertaining young adults, and as having a very weak focus on scripture. Therefore, it struck my curiosity going forward as I entered into college in regards to Millennials who left the Church for a variety of reasons, some including those who left because they viewed the Church as inauthentic in their mission.

Millennials are leaving the Church at staggering rates, and nearly a third of the Millennial generation has already identified themselves as being religiously unaffiliated. They are leaving for reasons such as that they feel the Church is too hypocritical, judgmental, inauthentic, exclusive, or political. With the rates of religiously unaffiliated Millennials on the rise, the question that arises is if they will return; despite the hope that they will return once they are married and have children, from the exhibited statistics shown in the literature review, and the findings through my qualitative research with Dr. Reed, I predict that we will not see a return, at least of the majority of Millennials who have left the Church, and may even see a consistent increase of religious disaffiliation over the years. To understand the magnitude of this problem, it is important to understand the history of how the Church has pursued young adults.

Prior to the cold war, the country went through a “revival”, in which it was the trend to be a Christian, and eventually it died off with the beginning of the cold war (Bellah 1976, 339). Within this time, movements, such as the addition in the 1950s of saying “*under God*,” in the pledge of allegiance, were initiated to make the United States what some still consider to be a “Christian nation.” However, following this audacious goal to make the United States appear as a Christian nation, the Baby Boomer generation prepared to question religious authority and institutions (335-6). What once was referred to as the nation founded under

God, or Christian beliefs, is now widely known as the most religiously diverse nation in the world¹ (Junius, 2007).

During the 1940s, there was a new movement happening in the Christian community that would change how the Church and Christianity related with young adults. In the 1940s, a man named Jim Rayburn started a ministry focused on reaching teens at local high schools, followed by him founding the organization, that is still present to this day, that focuses on reaching young adults with the gospel, called Young Life. Another organization with a similar motive that arose, also, during this time period was Youth for Christ. These organizations' mission was to lead young adults to Jesus Christ and help them grow in their faith (Wright, 2012). However, in the 1960s, there was division between the religious interests of the older generation and the younger generation. Baby boomers began exploring other religions, or leaving the Christian faith, in the midst of all the country's social reformations, and this led to a decline in church attendance. Church attendance was roughly equal amongst all age groups until the 1960s, in which it marked the first time in which young adults became noticeably disengaged in the church and the Christian community by choice. The Baby Boomer generation began this trend, and each generation, leading up to the Millennial generation, has carried it out in a more significant manner (Kinnaman 2011, 36).

Starting in the 1970s, youth ministry was implemented into the church, both adult and youth attendance; however, these youth ministry programs were focused on entertainment. As Church became more about entertainment, they began to focus more on shortening the messages, and entertaining with music, food, and games - which lowered the percentage of

¹ Junius argued that the immigration reform that occurred in 1965 led to America becoming the most religiously diverse nation in the world; thus, young adults who have religious convictions may recognize others may also have similar convictions about their own religion, as well. In his interviews with multiple young adults, they expressed that they don't believe, "other faiths are devoid of truth."

young adults who desired to be actively involved within the Church community (Wright, 2012) These programs were highly criticized over their focus to entertain rather to teach and inform that it eventually began to have a measurable impact on young adult attendance. The youth ministry programs in the church responded with trying to give “wow” messages, that were powerful, but would not necessarily relate to a young believer’s life; therefore, there was a disconnect, and it caused even more disengagement with the church amongst the younger generation (Wright, 2012).

This then brings us to the question this thesis seeks to answer: “Why are Millennials leaving the Church?” To answer this question I, along with Dr. Reed and other research assistants, formed questions surrounding the topics of spiritual wounds, communities, biblical authority, the Emerging Church, the Church being hypocritical and judgmental, and authenticity. This thesis, however, focuses specifically on authenticity, spiritual wounds, judgmentalism, and the issue of being hypocritical. These questions objectively address these issues through the format of a focus group in which 4-10 people would participate, or individual people would be interviewed. Our sample of students was from a southern Millennial population at Appalachian State University and the Wild Goose Festival in Hot Springs, NC. After conducting several focus groups and individual interviews with those that participated, qualitative analysis would be conducted on the data collected.²

From my analysis of my data, I will argue that Millennials most likely will not return to the Church due to the major issues and problems they are seeing within the institution of the Church and amongst its community. Also, after reviewing why they will not return to the Church, I will also discuss how the Church can address this exodus of Millennials from the

² See Methods Section for further detail into how we conducted the study, page 35.

Church, and even why some of our participants believe Millennials are staying in the Church. However, based on the statistical data from past quantitative research reports, and from the data collected in our qualitative research, I argue that Millennials will not return to the Church regardless of the Church's efforts to reverse this issue of Millennials leaving the Church.

In the following sections I will do the following: I will review past literature on Millennials and religious disaffiliation in the section titled Literature Review. What I will show in this section is that there is a certain and verifiable trend that Millennials are leaving the Church. Scholars have highlighted a series of reasons for this, such as that Millennials view the Church as too focused on power and money, too involved in politics, or that they are too focused on their theological rules and thus have become exclusive to certain groups of people, such as the LGBTQ+ community. Scholars also highlight the differences in the trends between the previous generations and the current Millennials generation, and discuss the probability of Millennials returning following marriage and children. Following the Literature Review, I will discuss the research methods that were taken to collect our qualitative data under the section titled Methods, and our findings from our research under the section title Findings. In the Findings section, I will show that there are certain significant codes that co-occur with other codes to a high degree throughout multiple focus groups that correlate with the quantitative research shown and discussed in the Literature Review, thus showing the strength of these analytical conclusions based on past and present research. I will discuss how the quantitative data and qualitative data parallel one another in making the argument and conclusion that Millennials are leaving the Church at record numbers, and there is a rising probability that they may not return. This can be found in the section titled,

Discussion, under the subsection, “Past and present research conclusions and parallels.

Lastly, I will have a brief discussion within this same section under the subsection, “How to bring Millennials back,” on how the Church could address this issue with Millennials leaving the Church, and possibly be effective in reversing this trend.

I predict that Millennials, in accordance to the qualitative data that was collected and the quantitative data that was discussed, will not return to the Church as past generations have once they were married or had children, but rather find new communities to invest in and methods of identifying themselves to grow them as individuals within society. This thesis intends to discuss the current situation with Millennials and their views of the church through the use of quantitative and qualitative data in order to give a clearer, and more personal, perspective on the current views that Millennials have towards the Church, and why they are leaving.

Literature Review

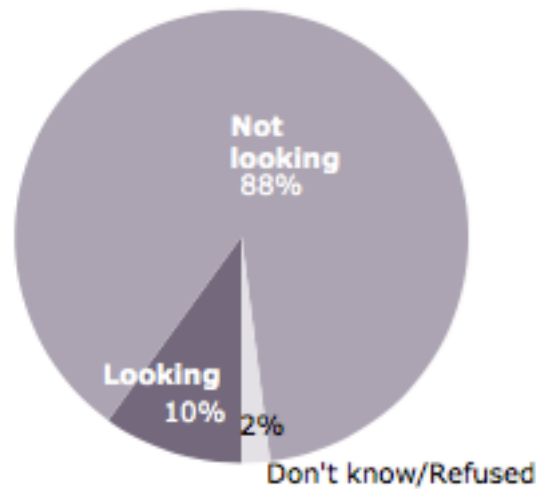
Nones on the Rise

Religious disaffiliation has become an important issue over the past few years, and the cohort that has drawn a particular interest in regards to this topic would be that of Millennials; Millennials are those between the ages of 18 and 29. Millennials have noticeably been less active within religious communities than previous generations, and a significant portion of them have begun to disaffiliate themselves with religion all together, and thus are falling under the category of the, “nones,” or those who are religiously unaffiliated. In the Pew Forum report, *Nones on the Rise* (2012), they found that in the past five years that those who identify as being religiously unaffiliated has increased between 15% and 20%. Among

these percentages, over 13 million of them are self-described atheists or agnostics, and 33 million of them are religiously unaffiliated³ (Lugo, et al. 2012, 9).

Are You Looking For a Religion that Would be Right for You?

Among those who identify their religion as "nothing in particular," % who say they are ...



Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q72. Based on those who say their religion is "nothing in particular."

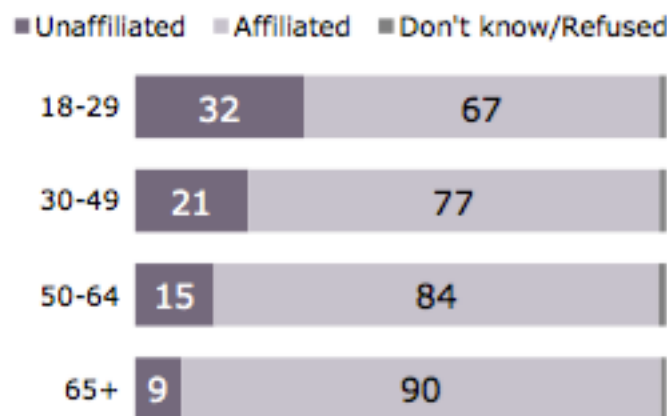
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However, Pew Forum also showed that of their sample, those that identified as "unaffiliated," 88% of them also stated that they were not looking for a religion that best fit their interests and beliefs (10). This could be argued as being because of institutions, as Millennials have appeared to be also very anti-institutional. Millennials may be avoiding religion because the church has become an institution, and thus they view religious institutions as being only out for the money and power rather than having an authentic and

³ However, of all the religiously unaffiliated Millennials, 68% of them say they believe in God. This shows that while Millennials are leaving institutional religion, they may still identify themselves as being spiritual, just not religious (Lugo, et al. 2012, 9-10).

sincere goal-driven purpose.⁴ Millennials are now not only leaving the church, but they are not expressing any interest in finding another religion that aligns with them more significantly. When looking at past generations in comparison to Millennials, Pew Forum shows that those that are between the ages of 18-29 identify themselves as being religiously unaffiliated more than any past generation (10).

Religious Affiliation by Age



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January-July 2012.

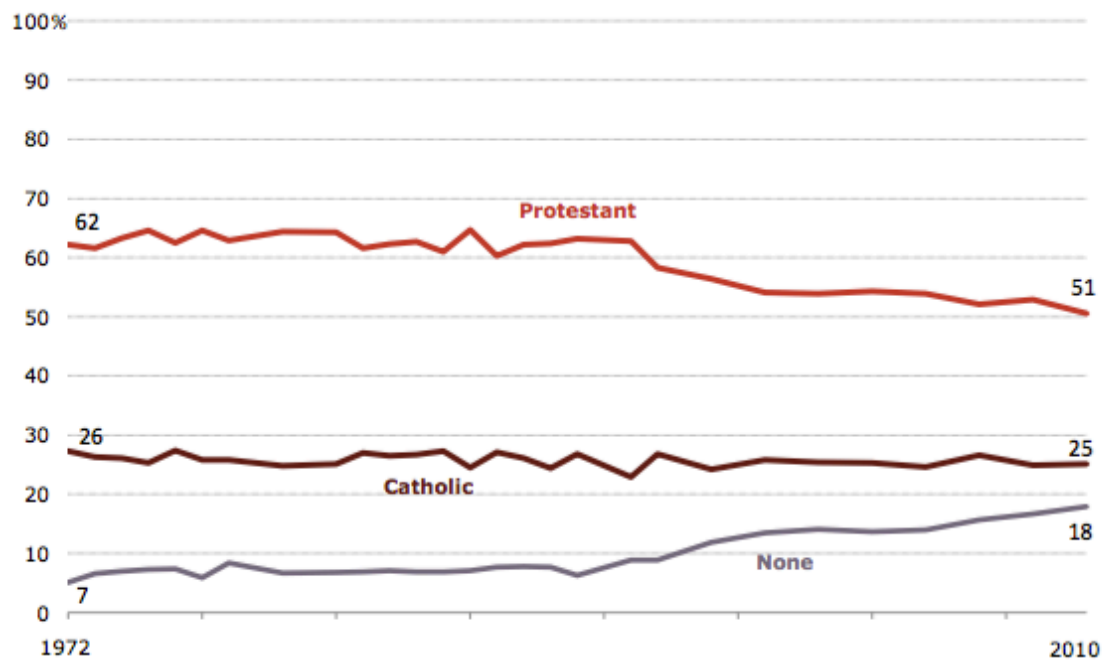
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However, the data that is collected for this comparison was collected by Pew Research Center between January and July 2012, which could suggest that this comparison could actually represent that older generations come back to the church. As seen with those from previous generations, they may leave the church when they enter into college, but once

⁴ Randall Reed in his article *Millennials and the Problem with Institutions* (2016, 2-3), discusses a Harvard Institute of Politics survey (2016) that demonstrates that 51% of Millennials trust the military, 40% trust the president, 31% trust the local government, 28% trust state government, 23% trust federal government, 18% trust congress, 11% trust wall street, and only 9% trust the media. Thus it could be argued that Millennials are significantly distrustful of institutions.

they get married and have a family, they typically will return with their children. However, according to Pew Report's findings in a long-term analysis of religious affiliation trends, since 1972 until the 1990s, religious affiliation was decently stable.

Long-Term Trends in Religious Affiliation



Source: General Social Surveys, 1972-2010. Other religious affiliations and those who did not give an answer are not shown.

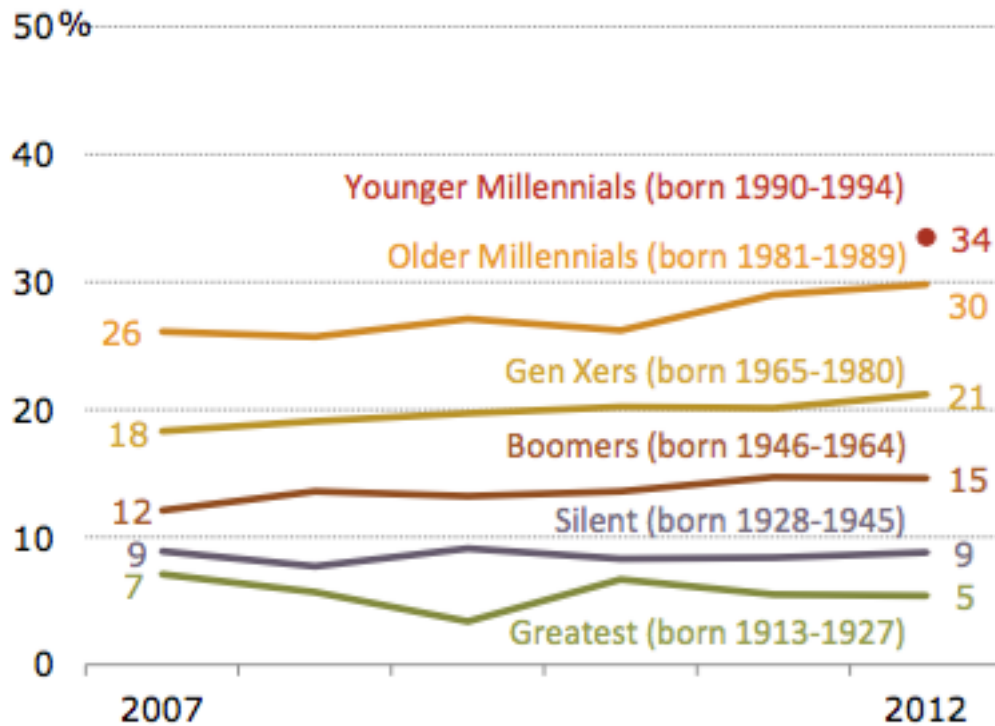
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Those who identified as “unaffiliated,” were at 7% of the population, in comparison to 2010 when it reached as high as 18% of the U.S. Population. 32% of the Millennial generation alone, as shown in an earlier graph, identifies with being religiously unaffiliated. Therefore this trend started to climb with Generation X, and only became stronger in

Generation Y, or the Millennials (14).

Recent Trends in Affiliation, by Generation

% of each age cohort that is unaffiliated



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007-2012.

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Pew Forum's graph above shows that younger Millennials born between 1990 and 1994 are already 4% higher in identifying with being "religiously unaffiliated" than the older Millennials born between 1981 and 1989. Both the older and younger Millennials are 9-13% higher in the "nones" category than Generation X, and double in size in comparison to the Baby Boomer generation (16). These graphs show how religious disaffiliation has increased over the past 10 years, but also the differences between Millennials and previous generations. Pew Forum also pointed out that of those that fell into their "nones" category, most of them

also identified as being within the religious tradition at an earlier time in their life. Therefore, it can be argued that Millennials are leaving the Church at a staggering rate, and most of these Millennials also grew up in some type of religious household. Pew Research Center found that over 74% of all unaffiliated adults were once religiously affiliated.

However, even with these rising statistics stating that Millennials are leaving the Church, in comparison with other countries, the United States still has 58% of its citizens claiming religion is very important in their lives, in comparison to Britain at 17%, France at 13%, Germany at 21%, and Spain at 22%⁵; thus, the United States can still be argued to be one of the most religious nations in the world despite these statistics with Millennials (17).⁶ When Pew Forum analyzed “religious attendance,” they found that between the years 2007 to 2012, an increasing number of those who identified as unaffiliated reported that they seldom attended or never attended church (38% in 2007 vs. 49% in 2012). Only 13% in 2012 reported they attend religious services monthly or yearly, and only 2% reported attending weekly or more. The most interesting statistic is the adults who identify as religious unaffiliated, but attend weekly services once a week or more, because it could be assumed that it would not an environment they would not consistently be present in during the week. This statistic, however, stayed decently consistent between 2007 and 2012, as it dropped from 3% to 2%. The most drastic change was the unaffiliated that increased by 11% in 5 years (19).

As discussed briefly earlier, some reasons that Millennials could be leaving the church is because they are more anti-institutional than previous generations. In the graph

⁵ This was found in the Pew Report on Global Attitudes, which analyzed and compared attitudes towards a variety of issues between adults in the United States and those of European countries.

⁶ See appendix for comparison of United States data to France in religiosity, and a discussion about the differences between the trends of the United States and France.

below, you can see that 51% of the general public view religious institutions as being too concerned with money and power (51%), that they focus on too many rules (51%), and are too involved in politics (46%); and, of these statistics, 70% of unaffiliated U.S. adults believe religious institutions are too concerned with money and power, and 67% believe religious institutions are too focused on rules or are too involved in politics (23).

Views of Religious Institutions

% who agree that churches and other religious organizations ...

	U.S. general public	Unaffiliated	Affiliated
	%	%	%
Are too concerned w/money and power	51	70	47
Focus too much on rules	51	67	47
Are too involved w/politics	46	67	41
Bring people together/strengthen community bonds	88	78	90
Play important role in helping poor and needy	87	77	90
Protect and strengthen morality	76	52	81

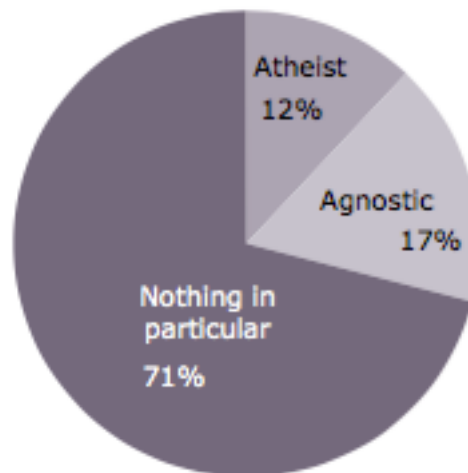
Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012.
Q73a-g. Responses of disagree and those who did not give an answer are not shown.

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With most of the younger Millennials, as of 2016, now being of age to vote and be included in these statistics, it will be interesting to see if their results of Millennial opinions, especially those of the unaffiliated, either decrease or increase with the new surplus of participants. As Millennials are almost all of adult age, it will be interesting in a future

study by Pew Report to see if the amount of self-reported religiously unaffiliated adults increases or decreases, and whether the negative opinions towards institutions will follow suit.

Composition of the Unaffiliated



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January-July 2012. Based on those who are religiously unaffiliated.

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According to Pew Forum (2012), of those that identified as being unaffiliated with any religion, 12% of them identify as atheist, 17% identify as agnostic, and 71% of them identify as “none.” This composition can also show that as those of Generation X, and especially Millennials, are being accounted for in these analyses, most of them are hesitant not only to conform or identify with a religious identity or group, but also with an “unaffiliated” identity. Some of them are even referring to themselves as the “nones,” because they don’t view themselves as religious, atheistic, or agnostic (42). Millennials are not just now avoiding participating in religious institutions, but they also seem to be avoiding

any definitive religious, or nonreligious, labels for themselves. According to Pew Forum, 65% of the U.S. general public identifies as being religious, 18% identifies as being spiritual, and 15% identify as being neither spiritual nor religious. Of those that identify as being unaffiliated, 18% identify as being religious, 37% identify as being spiritual, and 42% identify as being neither spiritual nor religious. Only 34% of those that identify as atheist or agnostic identify with being spiritual, and only 7% identify as being religious. Of the “nothing in particular,” which could also fall into the “none” category, or those unaffiliated, 23% are religious, 39% are spiritual, and 36% are neither spiritual nor religious (43). These statistics show that Millennials in the unaffiliated categories typically view themselves as spiritual, including in the statistic of those that identify with being atheist or agnostic. The average amongst the “unaffiliated,” “atheist/agnostic,” and “nothing in particular,” categories of those who don’t affiliate but view themselves as being spiritual is 36.7%. Over a third in each category views themselves as being spiritual, even if they refer to themselves overall as being a “none,” or someone not affiliated with any religion or institution.

When Pew Forum also analyzed those who said religion is very or somewhat important in their lives, and who attend worship services a few times a year, seldom, or never, and they asked the question,

“why don’t you go to services more often?” They found that of those unaffiliated it was because they didn’t agree with the religion, didn’t view it as a necessity to attend Church, or that the Church wasn’t strict enough (28%); this compared to the 18% that were affiliated that listed this as a reason as to why they did not attend church as often. Of those that identified with being unaffiliated, 8% of them said that hypocrisy within the church was a reason why they didn’t attend, and 5% stated that they viewed the Church as corrupt. Of those affiliated, hypocrisy was a reason for 5%, but only 3% viewed the Church as corrupt. 10% of those unaffiliated said that they were too busy to attend, and

7% said they had work conflicts. Among the affiliated, the percentage was significantly higher as 16% of those affiliated said they were too busy and 12% said they had work

Why Don’t You Go To Services More Often?

Among those saying that religion is very or somewhat important in their life and who attend worship services a few times a year, seldom or never

	--Among all asked--	
	Unaffiliated	Affiliated
	%	%
Religion-related NET	59	37
Don't agree with religion/ Not necessary to attend church/ Church not strict enough	28	18
Hypocrisy	8	5
Church leaders too pushy/demanding	6	2
Church corrupt/too concerned with money/power/politics	5	3
General dislike of religious leaders	5	2
Looking for/Haven't found local church	1	2
Other religion-related reasons	3	2
Personal Priorities NET	17	24
Too busy	10	16
Just don't feel like going	5	3
Laziness	2	4
Practical difficulties NET	15	24
Work conflicts	7	12
Health issues	3	6
Difficulties with transportation	3	4
Other	4	5
Don't know/Refused	5	9
	100	100
N	212	618

Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q51. Open end. Figures reflect first response given only. NET figures may not add exactly due to rounding. Only responses given by at least 2% of either affiliated or unaffiliated respondents are shown under each NET category.

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conflicts, which impacted their ability to attend church on a consistent basis. These statistics give perspective as to the reasons why both the unaffiliated and the affiliated may not be able to attend religious services on a regular basis, and what may eventually lead to them not attending church at all (50). However, they also analyzed both unaffiliated and affiliated responses in regards to their overall view of religious institutions and organizations. Of the unaffiliated responses, 78% viewed that they bring people together, 77% viewed that they help the poor and needy, and 52% viewed that they strengthen individual or communal morality; however, they also viewed that they are too concerned with money and power (70%), too focused on rules (67%), and too involved with politics (67%). In comparison, amongst the affiliated responses, 47% viewed religious institutions as too concerned with money and power, 47% viewed them as being too focused on rules, and 41% viewed them as being too involved in politics (58).

U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious Study

According to Pew Report's other study, "*U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*," those that identify themselves as being religiously affiliated have stayed roughly in their beliefs and how involved they are in the local church the same since 2007 until 2014; however, the percentage of those that are religiously affiliated has decreased by 6 percent. The percentage of the religiously unaffiliated has increased by 7 percent, and the overall reported belief of God among them has decreased by 9 percent (

, et al. 2015a, 4). In regards to politics, religious "Nones," is the single largest group among the Democratic party, and Evangelicals are the largest religious group in the Republican

party (9).⁷ When Pew Report analyzed how important religion was to the religious “nones,” how often they pray, how often they attend religious services, and their belief in God, they noted they are becoming increasingly secular (15). 65 percent of the religiously unaffiliated claim that religion is not important in their lives as of 2014 compared to 57% in 2007; also, among the religiously unaffiliated, the amount of claims that they believe in God has decreased from 70% to 61% from 2007 to 2014, and the amount of have claimed they do not believe in God has increased by 11% (15).

Pew Report found that between the years 2007 and 2014 that those who are religiously unaffiliated has increased by 6.7%, or in other words, it the number of religiously unaffiliated adults has increased from 36.6 million people to 55.8 million people. Of those 55.8 million people, 36.1 million people claim that religion is not important in their lives.

Rapid Growth in Number of Religious ‘Nones’ Who Say Religion Is Not Important to Them

	2007	2014	Change
Number of adults in U.S.	227.2m	244.8m	+17.6m
Share of adults who are religiously unaffiliated	16.1%	22.8%	+6.7 points
NUMBER of religiously unaffiliated adults	36.6m	55.8m	+19.2m
Share of unaffiliated adults saying religion is “not too/not at all” important in their lives	57.5%	64.7%	+7.2 points
NUMBER of religiously unaffiliated adults saying religion is not important in their lives	21.0m	36.1m	+15.1m

Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014.

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While the amount of religiously unaffiliated adults has increased by 19.2 million people, the amount of people in that category who claim that religion is no longer important increased by 15.1 million people (19). Pew Report continues by showing a comparison

⁷ According to Pew Forum’s study, *None’s on the Rise*, (2012) they argue that specially Millennials have turned away from organized religion because they view the Church as being too involved in conservative politics, and they would rather have nothing to do it. They discuss that Robert Putnam from Harvard University and David Campbell from Notre Dame argued that religiosity and conservative politics began to align in the 1970s through the 1990s; thus, Pew Forum argues that as a result, Millennials view the Church and religion in general as being “judgmental, homophobic, and too political.” (Lugo, et al. 2012, 29)

chart of how different generations have different views of religion, and the differences among all the generations.

Members of Younger Generational Cohorts Far Less Observant Than Older Americans

	Silent generation (born 1928-1945)	Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Older Millennials (born 1981-1989)	Younger Millennials (born 1990-1996)
<i>Importance of religion</i>	%	%	%	%	%
Very	67	59	53	44	38
Somewhat	18	24	25	27	29
Not too/not at all	13	17	22	29	33
Don't know/refused	1	1	1	1	*
	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Frequency of prayer</i>					
Daily	67	61	56	46	39
Weekly/monthly	16	21	21	23	25
Seldom/never	16	17	22	31	36
Don't know/refused	2	1	1	*	*
	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Attends religious services</i>					
Weekly or more	51	38	34	27	28
Monthly	10	14	16	15	16
Yearly or less often	38	47	50	58	56
Don't know/refused	1	1	*	1	*
	100	100	100	100	100

Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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As seen in the chart above, 67% of the silent generation claim that religion is very important in their life, compared to the Baby Boomers which is 59%, Generation X which is 53%, the Older Millennials which is 44%, and the Younger Millennials which are now at 38%. Also in terms of religious service attendance amongst the generations, 51% of the silent generation attends church on a weekly basis, 38% of the Baby Boomers attend church on a weekly basis, 34% of Generation X attends church on a weekly basis, 27% of the Older Millennials attend church on a weekly basis, and 28% of the Younger Millennials attend church on a weekly basis (21). If this trend stands, and the next few generations follow suit with the others, it could be significantly lower in the next 20-30

years than the current Millennial generation. Of the religiously unaffiliated, only 21% view religious institutions positively, and a majority (62%) have mixed views on them and their effectiveness as an institution (31). As Pew Report claims, only about every four in ten people claim to have positive views on religious institutions.

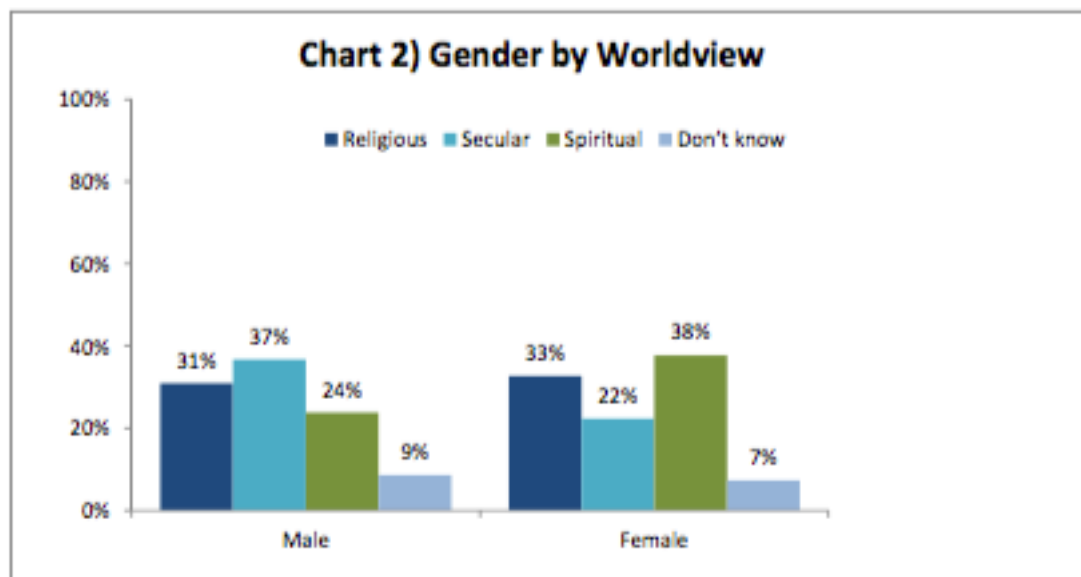
However, one finding Pew Report did find was that while the percentage of Americans that claim to believe in God has decreased, the views of those who do claim to believe in God of God's nature has stayed consistent. A majority (64%) claims that they view God as a person in which they can have a relationship as of 2014, and this percentage stayed the same since 2007 (37). Among the religiously affiliated, 46% state that they want their church or denomination to, "preserve its traditional beliefs," in comparison to 34% which would prefer that their church or denomination would conform to the changing societal circumstances and values (38). This could be an explanation as to why younger Millennials may be leaving the Church, because while less than half claim they want their Church to preserve its traditional values, most Millennials desire for the Church to conform; especially in light of the more recent wide spread acceptance of Homosexuality⁸ and Same-Sex Marriage⁹. According to this Pew Report study that did comparisons amongst the different cohorts, their data strongly suggests that while some beliefs about God may not have changed in regards to His nature, overall expressed belief in God, Church attendance, and how likely the younger generations will be religiously affiliated has decreased in the past 7 years substantially.

⁸ Most mainline churches have become more accepting of Homosexuality, Same-Sex Marriage, and Abortion since 2007. In regards to Homosexuality, it has increased in acceptance by 12% among Mainline Churches, and with Abortion it has increased by 2% across Christians in mainline churches (8). About also 46% of all religiously affiliated people have expressed favor towards Same-Sex Marriage (108).

⁹ According to ARIS, 65% of religiously affiliated groups are in support of gays and lesbians adopting a child, and 50% are in support of same-sex marriage (Kosmin & keysar 2013, 24).

ARIS

According to the American Religious Identification Survey (2013), that analyzed responses from Millennials, women are more likely to be religious (33% compared to 31%) and men are more likely to be secular (37% compared to 22%). It could be argued because, as some claim, women are more emotional beings that they would naturally seek out more emotional and spiritual connections. Men are typically associated with being the “bread-winner,” or the one needing to get the job and actively engage with the modern world and not reveal too many of his emotions to his peers.



Because of this, there may be a stigma around religiosity and gender, and it is more acceptable for women to be more religious than secular, as it is more acceptable for men to be more secular than religious. However, about the same number of men that report being secular, there is an about equal amount of women who report being spiritual; therefore, those who are religiously unaffiliated in each gender may be more prone to go towards the more socially accepted belief system for their gender (Kosmin & keysar, 2013, 9)

In this study, when they analyzed Millennial responses to how frequently they attended Church in their childhood, 82.1% of the religious group stated they went on a weekly basis, 37.2% of the secular group stated they went weekly, 55.1% of the spiritual group stated that they went weekly, and 56.2% said they weren't sure if they attended weekly or not.

Table 2) Worldview by Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services in Childhood

	Yes, weekly	Yes, monthly	Yes, only on major holidays	No, never	Don't know	Total
Religious	82.1%	8.9%	5.7%	3.0%	0.4%	100.0%
Secular	37.2%	11.5%	22.6%	28.1%	0.6%	100.0%
Spiritual	55.1%	13.7%	15.0%	15.4%	0.7%	100.0%
Don't know	56.2%	13.1%	13.8%	15.4%	1.5%	100.0%

However, while it is popular for Church's to recognize when they see members who are only attending during the major holidays of Christmas and Easter, only 5.7% of the religious group claimed in their childhood they only went during major holidays. This is in comparison 22.6% of the secular group that stated that they only attended religious services during the major holidays. Nearly 30 percent (28.1%) of the secular group of individuals also claimed that they never attended religious services in childhood. This study was analyzing how these frequencies might have affected their worldview of religion and religious institutions, as well as on certain issues relating to religion (12). This can be demonstrated through their results on whether or not Millennials viewed God as a necessity to be moral and have good values. In the secular group, 92% disagreed with this statement that God was necessary for morality, while the religious group was more evenly spread across whether or not they agreed or disagreed with this statement

(14). This study argues that based on how Millennials were raised, and what shaped their worldview; this is important because the worldview that Millennials had exposure to in their childhood could have changed significantly their views on religion and the issues that are associated with it.

Family and Communities

Christel Manning in her book, *Losing Our Religion* (2015), discusses how the worldviews, values, and traditions in which Millennials and “Nones,” are raised within by their families affect how they perceive community, family, religion, and the world. Manning states that, “Religion is not just about holding certain theological beliefs or attending organized services. It is also used about identity and values – and perhaps most importantly about community,” (104). She discusses throughout the book that “Nones,” are typically classified as people outside of religion, but it is rarely discussed in the research mediums about what “Nones” are actually practicing instead of religion (105). She classifies “Nones” into different categories: Unchurched believers, Spiritual Seekers, Philosophical Secularists, and the Indifferent. According to Manning, Unchurched believers are “Nones” that engage in religious practices, traditions, or express that they hold religious beliefs that resemble that of Christianity or Judaism (36). These may also be referred to as religious Nones; they tend to be the individuals that are unaffiliated, however express having a belief in God, or that they practice prayer or reading their Bible even though they are not religiously affiliated. Manning also describes Unchurched believers as having conventional strategy when they are seeking a community for their families to engage in for a time (107-8); conventional strategy describes when a None returns to the church because he or she seeks to provide a religious environment for their

children that is similar to which they grew up within in their childhood (108). This is also typically the type of Nones researchers are targeting when they doubt if Nones will return to the church even after having children. These type of religious Nones are those that could among religious communities be called culturally religious; because, they claim to not be religious but they participate in a religious beliefs, practices, and traditions out of familiarity or out of cultural acceptance rather than sincere desire to engage with the religion on a personal level (37, 109).

Spiritual Seekers are defined by Manning as having a “pluralistic religious orientation,” in which they engage in a various types of spiritual or religious traditions. As Manning pointed out, Spiritual Seekers may be those who have a hybrid religious name to describe their beliefs (e.g. “Buddhist Christian”) or that in which they claim that all religions are true, or perhaps that “all roads lead to heaven,” (39). Manning also describes the types of communities Spiritual Seekers typically seek out are those that have alternative beliefs.

Those that seek out these communities are seeking a community that is supportive of not being religious, however it engages with or argues for a variety of belief systems.

Children who are within these communities will engage with Buddhist belief systems, Christian belief systems, Jewish belief systems, and more (114). According to the AP Poll (2007), in a sample of 1280 participants, 44% say religion/spirituality is very important to them, 21% say it is somewhat important, 20% say it is a small part of their lives, and 14% say it does not play a part or roll in their lives. Also, according to this poll, seven out of ten people follow their own spiritual beliefs, but they believe that other belief systems could or are true as well. Of those that identified themselves as being spiritually involved, or religiously involved, 80% said they were happy with their lives;

however, 60% of those who said they were not affiliated with a religion or viewed religion and spirituality as unimportant were also happy (Junius, 2007).

Philosophical Secularists, as Manning (2015) describes, are Nones that, “explicitly reject religion in favor of following a nonreligious philosophy of life,” (41). She identifies this group of Nones as those who also identify themselves by titles such as Humanist, atheist, skeptic, etc. in order to affiliate themselves with an ideology that explicitly rejects religion. She also makes clear that Philosophical Secularists are not to be confused with those who ignore religion, because they have made their views on religion explicitly clear. These type of Nones when seeking a community typically may also fall under the Manning’s alternative community category, in which they will seek a community that reflects views centered around Humanism, Social Justice, or other issues that interest them. Two communities that Manning mentioned which are popular among this group of Nones are that of the American Humanist Association (AHA), and the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). She describes these organizations as all inclusive, and that they actively engage in a variety of topics, literature, and issues that create a welcoming environment for those who reject and do not affiliate with any religious belief (114-115).

Lastly, the Indifferent group, as Manning describes, are those that express “complete indifference to either religion or secular worldviews,” (43); thus, while she states that this group of Nones typically gets thrown into the categories of atheists, agnostics, or secularists, she thinks they deserve a separate category – especially considering this group of Nones is indifferent to a lot of the worldviews of both the religious groups, but also the secularists who pursue issues like Humanism (43). Indifferent Nones may not actually seek out a community to affiliate their family with as

they begin to have children. They may fall under the category of “self-providing,” or in other words, they pursue teaching their children moral values and necessary lessons based on their own personal life experiences and the help of others (possibly) rather than rely on the help of an institution or organization. She expresses how many in this category find that reading with their children is effective; however, there are not many reading options open for other religions outside of Christianity and Judaism in the genre of Children’s books. Even some philosophical secularists may pursue this community; because, they may view they are equipped with enough to teach their children what they need to know to be a good person and a moral citizen (122-3).

Manning states that there are more religious Nones than atheist Nones, thus she concludes that based on what scholars have found, the None movement may not actually be caused by secularization of society, but rather the religion and the subsequent religious institutions becoming more exclusive and privatized (29). She argues that children are what lead parents that fall into the None category to reconsider their religious affiliation, or their community affiliation, and may lead them to seek out communities that can provide the answers their children are seeking (104). Although, many Nones may be pursuing more pluralistic communities to avoid the exclusion and privatization of religion and ideologies that they are witnessing or experiencing, and thus be helping their children witness and engage in inclusion of all communities. It can be argued that from Manning’s analysis of how Nones raise their children and in their participation with different religions, ideologies, and beliefs that exclusion may be one of the biggest deterrents for Nones when considering whether to return to the Church or not once they have children. It may not be so much, as Manning states, the secularization of society that is causing

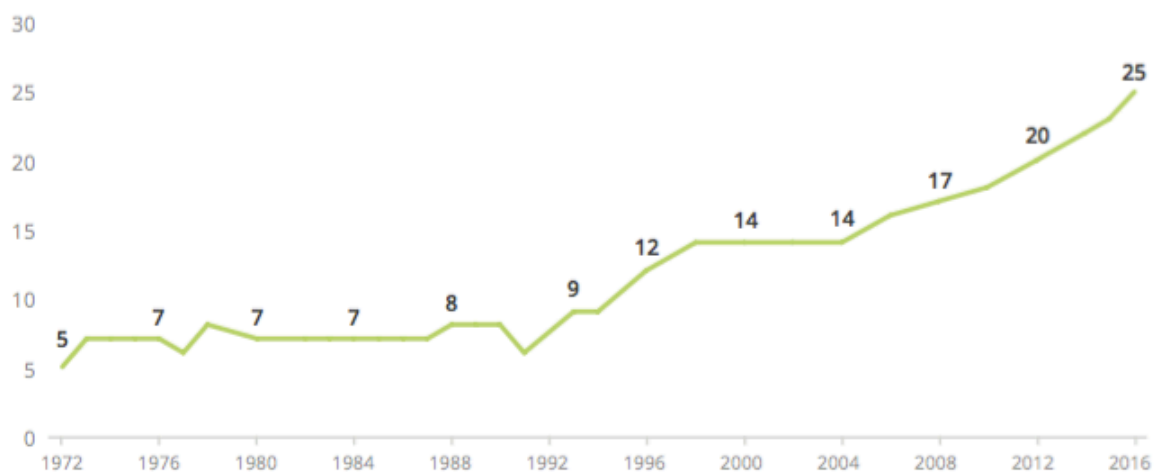
Nones to leave the Church at significant rates, but rather how the Church is responding to different communities, and how well they include other communities into their own.

PRRI, "Exodus"

The Public Religion Research Institute (2016) argues that as of the early 1970s up until the 1990s, the religiously unaffiliated stayed decently consistent at 7%; however, following the 1990s, it spiked up to 14%, and now by 2016 it is a quarter of the general population at 25% (Jones, Cox, Cooper, & Lienesch, 2016, 2).

FIGURE 1. Growth of the Religiously Unaffiliated, 1972-2016

Percent of population



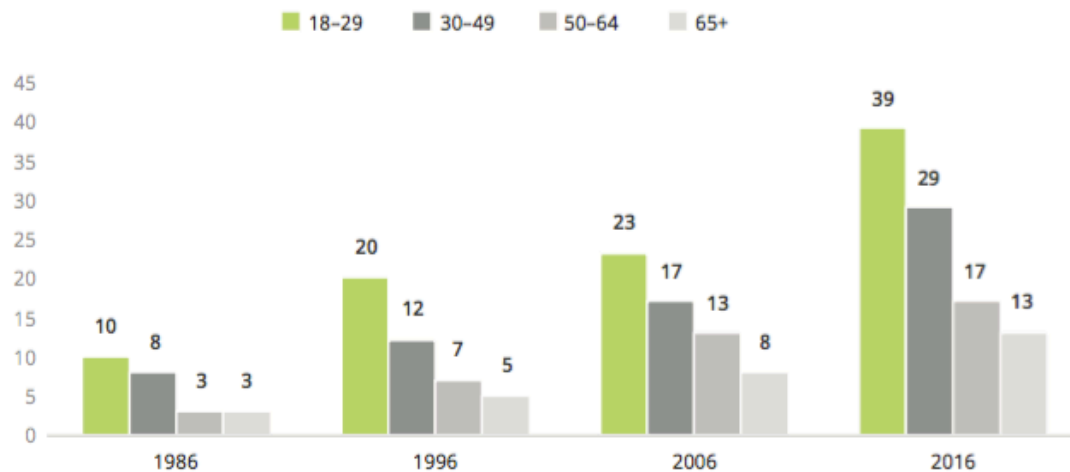
Sources: General Social Survey, 1974-2012; PRRI Surveys, 2014-2016.

However, what I found to be interesting in the above chart from PRRI is the negative dip in those that were religiously unaffiliated back to about 5%, which equaled the percentage in 1972. Following 1996, however, the percentage of those who identified as being religiously unaffiliated inclined at significant rates. Those who identify with

being religiously unaffiliated are now considered to be the largest “religious” group in the United States (2).

Those statistics focused on the general population, but what were their findings on Millennials and religious disaffiliation? They found that 39% of all young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 were religiously unaffiliated, which was three times greater than the percentage of seniors that are religiously unaffiliated as of 2016. Generation X is found, by their results, to be 29% religiously unaffiliated (3).

FIGURE 2. More Young Adults are Unaffiliated than in the Past
Percent of each age group who are religiously unaffiliated, 1986-2016



Sources: General Social Survey, 1986, 1996, 2006; PRRI/RNS August 2016 Survey

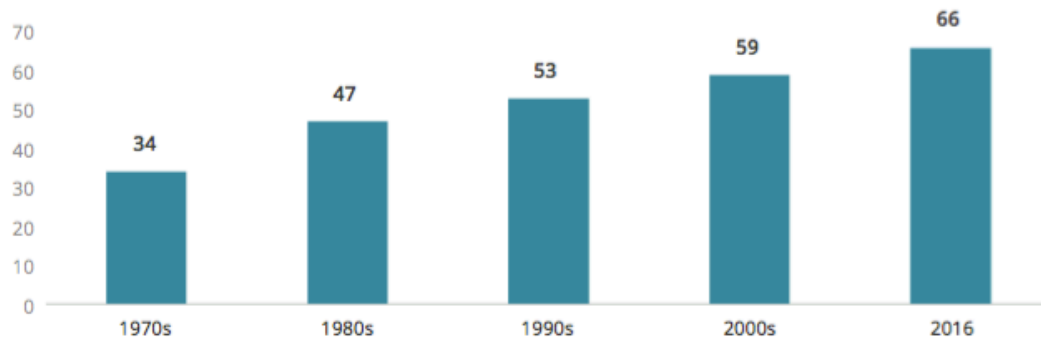
Their results argue that while the religious disaffiliation percentage increased from 1986 to 2006, the generational cohorts stayed decently close to one another with those who identified as being religiously unaffiliated. However, as of 1986, Generation X was only 2% higher than the previous generation. Millennials today who are also 18-29 are now four times as likely to be religiously unaffiliated in comparison to Generation X. While Generation X has increased in religiously disaffiliation over the years, it could be argued from these statistics that if Millennials follow that same trend as Generation X,

the percentage of Millennials who are religiously unaffiliated will be significantly higher, and may surpass 50% (3).

An interesting statistic that the Public Religion Research Institute gathered that I didn't find any other studies was the retention rate of those who are raised in unaffiliated households. According to the article by the Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," (Cooperman, et al., 2015b) they found that between 2007 and 2014, amongst Christians, it declined by nearly 8% (78.4% to 70.6%); it can be suggested from this that over the past few decades, especially within the Millennial generation, that retention within the Christian religion is declining, and they are struggling to maintain their religious congregation (4). Despite the religious expectations and obligations that comes with religious affiliation which would suggest higher retention rate, especially with the pressure and strength of one's community, they have declining rates in both attendance and religious commitment. However, the religiously unaffiliated have a very strong retention rate. According to PRRI (2016), 74% of all Americans that are under the age of 50 that were raised in a religiously unaffiliated household remained religiously unaffiliated (5).

FIGURE 3. Americans Raised Without a Religion More Likely to Remain Unaffiliated than in the Past

Percent of American adults who were raised unaffiliated and are still unaffiliated as adults



Note: Estimates for each decade were based on combined surveys.

Sources: General Social Survey, 1973-2008; PRRI/RNS August 2016 Survey.

According to the chart above, this shows the retention rate of those that were raised in a religiously unaffiliated household that remained religiously unaffiliated since the 1970s. As of 1970, the percentage of those who remained religiously unaffiliated was 34%, and it has rapidly increased to 66% of all those who were raised in religiously unaffiliated homes have remained religiously unaffiliated as of 2016. This shows a high retention rate as of 2016 amongst these households and their religious disaffiliation (5)¹⁰.

In the chart below, PRRI argues for some of the reasons they found to be factors in why Millennials are leaving the church, and in general, across all generations. Some of the most significant factors they found were that of age, lack of belief in the religion's teachings, family reasons, they had a negative experience with the teachings or with the church's views of those in the LGBTQ+ community, clergy scandals, a traumatic event, or politics (6). They found that participants stated a lack of belief in the religious

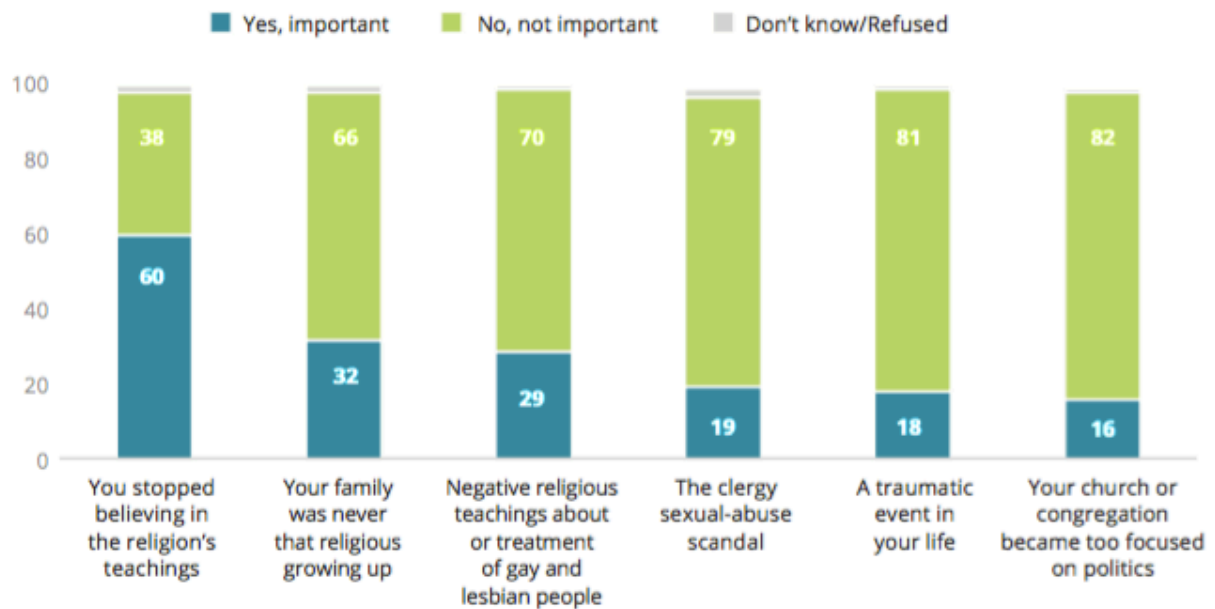
¹⁰ The Public Religion Research Institute (2016) also found that those raised in households in which the parents held different religious beliefs, were more likely to become religiously unaffiliated later in life than those who had parents that shared the same religious beliefs. While their sample focused mainly on the Catholic denomination for this finding, it can be reflected across religious denominations as mixed households could lead to children leaving that denomination for another (20% of Catholics left Catholicism for a protestant denomination) or becoming religiously unaffiliated (34% of Catholics became religiously unaffiliated) (8).

teachings was the most commonly quoted reason why they became religiously unaffiliated; 60% of their participants who had become religiously unaffiliated stated this as a reason for why they left religion. 32% of participants claimed that because their parents were not religious growing up, it eventually led to them leaving religion, thus reinforcing the previous statistic of retention that those who were raised in religiously unaffiliated homes during childhood would remain religiously unaffiliated later in life. 29% of participants stated that their experiences with religious teachings that were negative, or their experience with negative views on the LGBTQ+ community was the reason they decided to leave religion. 19% said they left due to a clergy scandal¹¹, 18% said they left because of a traumatic event, and 16% said they left because the church became too focused on politics (6-7).

¹¹ They operationalized this factor by measuring it on sexual clergy scandals, rather than including other types of clergy scandals. This may suggest a bias towards the most significant clergy scandal within the Catholic Church, or it could have been the easiest to operationalize; however, I think it is important to note that clergy members that change their religious agenda to a personal agenda, or cause harm to a church from their personal decisions whether privately or publically, should also be considered in this reason, and it may suggest another reason why Millennials could be harmed by the Church and decide to leave the Church and religion.

FIGURE 4. Reasons for Leaving Religion

Would you say any of the following were important reasons why you no longer identify with your childhood religion?



Source: PRRI/RNS August 2016 Survey.

These results show some of the major factors that lead to religious disaffiliation among these participants. It is important to point out that those who disaffiliated that had negative experiences with the religious teachings or with views of the LGBTQ+ community may have also been the ones to say they disaffiliated because they stopped believing in their religion's teachings. These two could be correlated in a way to suggest that the negative experiences these participants had also contributed to their decision to stop believing in the religion's teachings, and ultimately disaffiliate from the religion and leave the Church. They found that women were twice as likely to leave the Church and religion due to the religion teachings or the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community in comparison to men (40% vs. 20%), and young adults are three times as likely as seniors to leave for those same reasons, and ultimately choose to leave the Church and religion (39% vs. 12%) (6).

Across these several studies we have seen a variety of charts and data that give the reasoning factors as to why Millennials, and even previous generations, have left the church. Accord to Pew Report in their article, “*Nones on the Rise*,” (2012) they argued that several reasons were that the unaffiliated didn’t view going to church as important or that they didn’t agree with the teachings of the Church, as well as that they viewed the church as being too obsessed with power, money, and politics. This parallels what PRRI found in their results for the reasons why the unaffiliated claim that they became religiously unaffiliated. Over the course of these articles they have argued not only some of the reasons and causes for why Millennials have left the church, but they show statistics that argue that the trend is not slowing down, but rather may continue to be present and strengthen over the next generation. The major studies done by Pew Research Center, ARIS, and the Public Religion Research Institute strongly argue that this trend isn’t going away, but rather the declination in attendance amongst the younger generations is only going to increase over the next few years into the next generation, and based on the retention rates they are finding amongst the unaffiliated, they most likely may not come back.

Dr. Randall Reed and I have been conducting research on a variety of topics for why Millennials are leaving the Church. Therefore, in the upcoming sections, I will discuss the methods we used to conduct this research, as well as our findings from this research.

Methods

For the past two years, I have been conducting interviews and focus groups on the subject of why Millennials are leaving the Church. My sample population has been southern Millennials between the ages of 18-29 from Appalachian State University in

Boone, NC, and the Wild Goose Festival in Hot Springs, NC. For each focus group I have created a set of 8-11 research questions¹² that are IRB Exempted¹³ to examine Millennial opinions on various issues, such as Authenticity, Spiritual Wounds, and Reason Millennials are Leaving the Church. I would have all my participants fill out a consent form prior to participating in the study informing them of the risks, the purpose of the study, as well as their right to leave at any point in time during the study. I would audio record each focus group and save it into an audio file. I would then proceed to transcribe the audio-recorded documents from the focus groups into word documents. These documents would be all stored in a file that would be only accessible to Dr. Reed, and the Research Assistants. After transcription, I would code the transcripts, using an online program called Depose, which would help in organizing and analyzing the research. Following this I would analyze the codes to prepare them for being described.

Findings

Over the course of the two years, Dr. Randall Reed and I have been conducting interviews and focus groups to study the reasons why Millennials are leaving the Church. In this section, we will discuss several of the most important topics that were discussed within our focus group. These topics are Spirituality, Acceptance, Community, Authenticity, and Spiritual Wounds.

Spirituality

We defined this term of spirituality as an alternative to religiosity, or, in other words, individuals who describe themselves as being “spiritual but not religious.”

¹² See Appendix III: Focus Group Questions

¹³ See Appendix V: IRB Exemption

Millennials who typically describe themselves under this label usually choose to take specific ideologies or theologies from a variety of religions, or one religion, and shape them into their own sort of religious identity. It involves not adopting the full label of a certain religion with its obligations, expectations, and all of theologies, but rather only the ones that align with one's personal religious identity and life goals.

In one of our early focus groups, one of the participants stated this belief clearly when they said,

I could [refuse] to say I'm a Christian, and [rather] say I'm spiritual, [and be] fine.

I think the biggest disconnection [in Christianity] is to be a Christian [requires that] you are tethered to a Book that has some problematic [topics] which you have to explain to others, even if you [are unable to do so.] I just think so many people in our generation are like, 'why would I want to label myself into a church for things that I can just say I spiritually believe in?

The ideology and theology of being "spiritual but not religious," can suggest that, especially in reference to the above quote, Millennials are interesting in a low-risk religious affiliation. Low-risk faith religious affiliation is referring to the ideology that one can adopt certain principles from a religion, ideologies, or theological beliefs according to their own personal identity, and exclude other beliefs that do not align with their chosen belief system (David Colbert).¹⁴ This allows for others to claim in believing in a system or set of ideals without the need to defend why they believe in it, or the need to defend an entire system of beliefs, such as in the case of if you're a Christian and you must defend Christianity. It allows for the least amount of harm and the most amount of

¹⁴ The proposition of Millennials having a low-risk faith was suggested by one of my classmates and research assistants, David Colbert, in which I then adopted into my own qualitative analysis.

significance, and allows for the Millennial or participant to remain in a preferred “comfort zone” without being placed in uncomfortable situations in which they feel unprepared. This low-risk religious affiliation could explain exactly why Millennials may also be leaving the Church and organized religion, but are still claiming to believe in God and/or that they are spiritual as a religious affiliation. This low-risk approach towards religion can best be shown in this participant’s description of their approach towards religion and spirituality,

I think I’ll just take some basic morals, practice that, [and] call it spirituality...I don’t want to constantly be defending my religion all the time, I want it to help people.

According to Pew Research Center in their article, “*Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change,*” (2010)¹⁵ more Millennials state that one of the most important things they value in their lives is to help people in need (21%) in comparison to living a very religious life (15%) (2010, 2). According to Pew Research Center though, 52% claimed being a good parent was their first priority, and having a successful marriage was their second most significant priority (30%). However, having a high-paying career amongst Millennials was equally as important as living a very religious life (15%), and was not as important as owning their own home (20%). In comparison to Generation X, having a successful marriage has decreased by 5%, living a religious life has decreased in

¹⁵ This Pew Research Center report was an all inclusive report on Millennials in 2010 that discussed topics on Identity, Priorities, Outlook, Technology and Social Media, Work and Education, Family Values, Lifestyle, Politics, Ideology, Civic Engagement, Religious Beliefs, and Behaviors. It was carried out by 7 projects, including: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, Pew Internet & American Life Project, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Pew Hispanic Center, Pew Global Attitudes Project, and Pew Social & Demographic Trends Project.

importance by 6%, desiring to be successful in a high-paying career has increased by 8% amongst Millennials (18).

These statistics give a picture that religion is not one of their major priorities, and could explain why favoring theological ideologies that align with their lifestyle choices is more favorable than aligning oneself with a religion that has its own set of obligations and expectations that one may feel they are unable to meet. One Millennial stated that,

The biggest reason Millennials have a problem with Christianity is that when you ask the question, 'what can Christianity give me that spirituality can't [provide]?' you [will] find yourself in the position [in which you would rather] be spiritual; because, with spirituality I can do all of the things that I love about the Bible, [however] I'm not constricted by it – no one thinks I'm judgmental, [but rather] it is just my personal, individual spirituality.

By the above statement in one of our focus groups, the belief that one should rather be spiritual because it allows them to adopt certain things from the Bible (or any other religious text or ideology) that they view to be relevant to their worldview, and they can place it under the umbrella of their own spirituality while dismissing the restrictions of the religion itself. This reinforces Pew Research Center's findings (2010) that living a religious life is not a priority to most Millennials, and it also argues for what we found to be a low-risk religious affiliation. This Millennial argues that simply identifying as spiritual with the intention to adopt certain beliefs from the Bible eliminates the possibility of him being viewed as judgmental¹⁶ or closed minded, and allows him to live out a spiritual life without confrontation towards his specific belief system.

¹⁶ While the code of Judgmentalism may be discussed within other primary code sections, it did not appear the most significantly on its own in regards to the most discussed topics, but it did appear within certain primary

When we examined the most frequent codes that appeared and the codes that seemed to be the most significant in relation to the topics of the focus groups, we found that Spirituality co-occurred 8 times with our other code of “Alternatives to Church Attendance”¹⁷ This suggests that Spirituality was a favorable alternative amongst Millennials as being a religious outlet that allowed them a low-risk approach towards participating in religious practices, but also is a provided reason as to why Millennials no longer attend Church or participate in religious organizations.

Acceptance, Exclusion, and Spiritual Wounds

We defined acceptance as when the Church would accept people into their community regardless of the differences between one another's viewpoints. This was found to be a key indicator in whether a community had authenticity, and whether Millennials viewed a community as being sincere in their mission statements and goals. There were two opposite sides to this code, however, in which it included both acceptance and exclusion. We defined exclusion as when Millennials felt that the Church intentionally, whether implicitly or explicitly, made them feel isolated or unwelcome within the Church community. Of particular interest in my research was the topic of “*spiritual wounds*” in which it is not only a branch off of the Church excluding people, but it results in the excluded individuals gaining a strong negative perspective on the

codes. Individually, however, judgementalism co-occurred with institutions 17 times, and authenticity 8 times. Over the course of our focus groups and the collected data, this could suggest that Millennials view institutions, and especially religious institutions, as being highly judgmental towards causes they care about or communities they are invested or aligned with in their daily lives. They also viewed judgementalism as a key component to determining if there was a lack of authenticity within an organization or community.

¹⁷ The “Alternatives to Church Attendance” code was described as alternatives that Millennials chose to participate in that substituted attending Church or participating in a religious organization. Overall, Attendance conflicts were discussed 12 times amongst all of our focus groups, and 8 of those times it co-occurred with Spirituality.

Church, Christianity, and some of its community. Therefore, this section will talk about Acceptance in regards to both how Millennials view it as an essential part of good, authentic, and sincere community, but also about how the antithesis of it, exclusions and Spiritual Wounds, have harmed the image of the Church as a whole, and its community amongst Millennials.

In one of our focus group questions we asked what a welcoming church would like to Millennials¹⁸. One Millennial responded to the question stating they believe that, If the people in [the Church] were more diverse, if the community didn't dress super-nice and [proceed to] look down on someone if they walked in with gym shorts and a t-shirt of a metal band – I mean, I don't think the actual building would have a look [to be welcoming.] It's more [about] how the people inside the building look.

This Millennial responded more in regards to the image of the church, and focused on how diverse the community was or how the community dressed. This is just one example of how Millennials determine acceptance in the communities they involve themselves with during their daily lives. According to Pew Research Center in their article, *“Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change,”* (2010), Millennials are one of the most racially diverse generations this country has seen, and thus they argue that this alone makes Millennials more open to change and diversity (1). The Millennial generation is 61% white, 14% black, 19% hispanic, 5% asian, and 1% other. The Millennial generation from their racial makeup is diverse, thus this gives an explanation why diversity may be important to Millennials when determining if a community is accepting (1).

¹⁸ See question 10 in Appendix III under the Fall 2016 focus group questions.

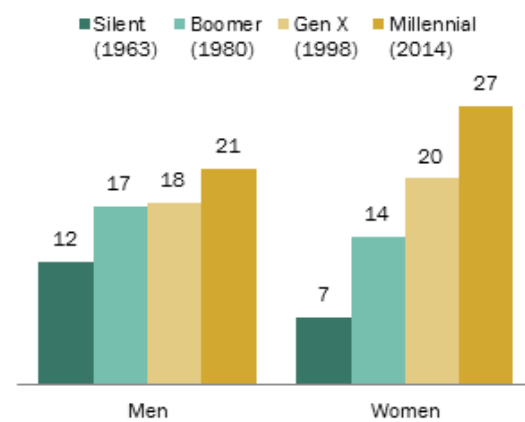
As of 2010, which mainly included Older Millennials since Younger Millennials were not over 18 yet, 49% of the male Millennial surveyed population had received some college or had surpassed a 4 year degree, and 60% of the female Millennial surveyed population had received some college or had surpassed a 4 year degree (11). In comparison, of the male population, 46% of Generation X, 38% of Boomers, and 28% of the Silent generation had received some college or above in education. Of females across generations, 52% of Generation X, 34% of the Boomer generation, and 21% of the Silent generation had received higher education.

According to the Pew Research Center's article, *"How Millennials today compare with their grandparents 50 years ago"* (2015c) Millennials are heading in

the direction of being the most educated generation in this country, because 48% of the Millennial population as of 2014 had a bachelor's degree, compared to the 38% of Generation X, 31% of the Boomer generation, and 19% of the Silent generation (section 1). This is just another reason why Millennials will favor diversity, because by pursuing higher education, they have engaged with communities that are diverse from their own, and thus through knowledge gained through higher education on the issues minority

Millennials On Track to be the Most Educated Generation to Date

% completing at least a bachelor's degree at ages 18-33, by gender



Note: The educational attainment question was changed in 1992. So for Boomers and Silents, this refers to those who completed at least four years of college. Educational attainment was not available for the 1963 Current Population Survey. The education of Silents was approximated using 18-33 year-olds from the 1962 Current Population Survey.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of the March Current Population Surveys (1963, 1980, 1998, and 2014) from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)

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groups face, and through their own engagement with such communities, they favor diversity and acceptance more than any other generation.

Millennials are not just seeking accepting communities, but they are demanding that communities be accepting in order to be authentic and successful. They are judging not just religious communities on this standard, but also institutions. As one Millennial in our focus group stated in regards to the Church as a religious institution, “They [need to] preach acceptance as well as acting the way the preached.”

One Millennial stated in regards to the general idea of institutions being accepting, that

[Being] more genuine, more respectful, and more understanding to the fact that not everyone's going to accept your ideas. I mean, everyone's different: the way they think, how they take in certain [ideas]. Being genuine, respecting how they feel [is important.] If they don't believe in what you believe in, just respecting that and moving on from it and I think that's pretty much all I have to say.

Millennials strongly stand behind that respecting others, even in the face of differences in beliefs, cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, religions, or races, is the strongest indicator that a community is accepting of others. Overall, Acceptance co-occurred 10 times with Authenticity alone, their discussions on institutions occurred 62 times, and their discussions of sincerity within religious and nonreligious institutions occurred 16 times. This suggests that the topic of Acceptance amongst Millennials is very important in their decision whether a community they may involve themselves in is authentic and sincere.

Acceptance amongst Millennials is a key component any institution or community needs in order to be viewed as authentic and welcoming according to our participants.

However, what about the opposite side of acceptance, exclusions? Exclusions co-occurred 10 times with the Image of the Church, and the Image of the Church was discussed 30 times. Exclusions are a significant topic amongst Millennials when discussing the Church and it typically is always connected to Judgementalism, which was discussed 14 times across our participants. Judgment is most commonly viewed as the enemy of acceptance according to Millennials, and thus suggests that if a community, and especially a religious institution, expresses any kind of judgment towards any type of community, it is henceforth known as being judgmental, possibly hypocritical, unwelcoming, and inauthentic and insincere towards their values and mission. According to one Millennial, they view Christian communities as passively excluding people, rather than actively, when they stated that,

Christian Churches and communities exclude people not by an active force, but, to me, it seems passive. When I go to any church service, there seems to be a majority of a particular type, whether that's straight people, white people, or conservatives or liberals. My opinion on this is that it excludes people because [it sends the message those that don't fit in that majority are not welcome].

Again, the image of the church, and as stated before, diversity are closely connected when Millennials are determining if a Church, institution, or community is accepting or exclusive. According to this Millennial, they are arguing that Churches can be exclusively inclusive, or in other words, they specifically choose which groups of people they wish to include in their community, and which they choose to exclude in order to maintain a preferred image. This choice and direction to be exclusively inclusive can cause great harm to the outsider's view of the image a church or institution may hold,

because they may not feel as though they would fit into that image, or that the institution is wrong for holding such a “closed-minded” perspective on people.

One Millennial found that they experienced most exclusions within the church to be around social standing,

I've witnessed [exclusions] more based [around] social standing. A [majority] of the Church [is] based on money and who you knew and social connections, and it was less about what you believe.

They argue that the perspective that it depends on “what you do, and who you know,” seems to be a driving factor in exclusions in the Church. It could revolve around if you are wealthy, have an important job, or even if you are specifically close to the pastor in ways others can't seem to achieve. In large churches, typically individuals who have close connections with the pastor are viewed to have more authoritative power than those who are the most distant. This can cause a hierarchy that may have not been intended, but resulted from passive or implicit exclusion of certain groups of people and inclusion of others. One Millennials discussed experiences with the Church in which they had witnessed judgmental viewpoints towards the LGBTQ+ community within that community.

It has affected my view of the Church negatively, because I do know [a lot of] people who have been hurt by those [in the Church who hold] those views, because they are religious, but [they are also] homosexual, bisexual, or whatever else.

Same-sex marriage, and issues dealing with the LGBTQ+ community are hot topics amongst Millennials and social justice activists. Thus, the Church standing as an institution that is most evidently the most opposed to the issue and progressions of this

community not only makes the Church seem unwelcoming, and inauthentic in their pursuits to Millennials, but also highly judgmental and exclusive towards who they will accept in their community, and according to some, who they will accept as being worthy of Heaven.

As mentioned in the introduction, I came across a participant at the Wild Goose Festival who expressed that the reason she did not return to the Church or Christianity was because she referred to herself as being *spiritually wounded*. She stated that not only were the judgments and exclusions she witnessed within the Church harmful to her view of the Church, but they had also negatively impacted her view of God and the religion in general, and therefore left both Christianity and the Church. This is where I decided to research the topic of Spiritual Wounds.

Spiritual Wounds was defined in our research as being emotional wounds inflicted by the Church, or a religious community, that made an individual feel excluded, rejected, or unwelcome; therefore, having a negative impact on their perspective of the Church, the community, and the religion as a whole. I found this to be a more severe outcome caused by a church's exclusive behavior that not only leads someone to leave the Church, but typically also the religion as well. I think this is a primary factor as to why Millennials are leaving the Church if they themselves have witnessed exclusion by the Church or have been excluded themselves, and have generalized the negative experience to the greater whole of the meaning of the Church and Christianity. Witnessing exclusion or being excluded doesn't suggest one will leave the religion, the community, or even the universal Church, but rather may find a different church that is more welcoming and accepting of who they are as an individual. For Millennials seeking an accepting community within the Church, this may be their common response, and thus just find a

different religious community. However, some have experiences that are negative enough to halt all future efforts of engaging with the religion or religious community.

One example of a Millennial who expressed being excluded to an extreme was one that stated, “I was holding hands with my friend, who happened to be a girl, and we got kicked out of the church because we were being ‘lesbian-ish’.” This comment to one of our questions demonstrated extreme judgmentalism on behalf of the Church, a lack of acceptance, an unwelcoming church, and extreme exclusion. This wasn’t a church that sought to understand even why they were holding hands, but rather made an abrupt judgment and then proceeded to remove them from the community without much understanding. This experience can lead a Millennial to not just determine that the church they experienced has strong negative opinions about the LGBTQ+ community – that she isn’t even allowed to hold hands with a friend of the same sex without the risk of being permanently excluded from her community – but it can also lead to the decision not to seek out another church, community, and the decision not to pursue further understanding of her chosen religion.

Another Millennial described an experience that she heard about from someone close to her that demonstrated extreme exclusion and thus a spiritual wound that lead the individual to decide to possibly never return to religion. She stated that,

A woman that I’m pretty close to is adamantly against religion. She is gay, and where she’s from she [was] treated like crap as a result. Her being victimized by the Church is what pushed her way [from the Church and religion]. I’m not sure that if she [will] come back to religion, but it would be really hard [for her to return].

The participant described a situation where the Church excluded an individual to an extremity that she not only felt rejected by the local church she attended, but also the entire church community she engaged with, thus choosing not just to disaffiliate with a Christian denomination, a church, and a community, but also the entire religion. As discussed above, issues with the LGBTQ+ community seem to be at the forefront of Millennials' minds in regards to negative experiences with the Church that have ultimately caused people to decide to become religiously unaffiliated. However, issues dealing with the LGBTQ+ community and the Church are not the only situations that involve extreme exclusion and rejection that result in spiritual wounds. We had one participant discuss how parental influence in regards to religious affiliation can inflict their own kind of spiritual wounds.

[People prefer not to talk about religion because of a] negative experience. 'My parents stuffed [religion] down my throat,' or, 'it made me feel sheltered.' Just like a [number] of reasons that at their [foundation] seem to say, 'I felt rejected,' or smothered, or something that 'pushed me away.'

Parents can unintentionally be instigators of such spiritual wounds when a young adult feels isolated, sheltered, or if such religious affiliation may even cause them to be socially rejected from their peer group. This can ultimately lead them to decide to avoid the religion their parents affiliated with and either become religiously unaffiliated, or decide to explore other religions outside of the religion they were born into initially. Parents can also be a cause as to why Millennials are leaving the Church, because most parents of Millennials belong to the Boomer generation in which they were the active participants in the movement away from the Church.

Millennials may grow up in a family that is “culturally Christian.” We defined this term in our focus groups as being when attending church, especially during just holidays, is more of a habitual routine than something intentional. Those who grew up in culturally religious homes may attend church out of obligation to family tradition or because it is what they always have done in the past, and thus will continue to do it. They don’t necessarily overly involve themselves in the religious, or in this case, Christian, communities as devote believers may do; however, these cultural Christians may attend only a certain amount of services to still be considered a part of the community without it intruding on their daily activities and lives.

These types of households can lead Millennials and young adults to come to the conclusion that religion is ultimately not that important to one’s everyday life, and therefore make the decision later in life to disaffiliate completely. Unlike the previous generation where there was a growing rate of the religiously unaffiliated, but most individuals that belonged to that generation were content (or complacent enough) to remain in their religious upbringing than to change. Millennials, however, are not content in complacency, inauthenticity, or insincerity according to our findings on Authenticity. Thus, Millennials may be leaving the Church at increasing rates due to this view that the Church lacks authenticity within its community, and therefore they decide it isn’t worth their time to remain committed to something that lacks sincerity in the core of its foundation. This brings us to our next section on community.

Community

In our focus groups we had a question that honed in on what Millennials thought a welcoming community in the Church looked like to them. However, we also focused on

the types of communities that Millennials involved themselves in so we could better understand how they define community today. In a previous focus group we conducted that was based on communities, we asked a question about the ideology of Millennials being an individualistic or a communal generation, and we used the terms, “Generation Me” or “Generation We”.¹⁹ One participant responded to this by describing Millennials as idealists when they stated,

I think [Millennials are] idealists. [Millennials] do tend to overestimate the impact or the reach that [they] can have, which means [they] usually end up having to go back to focusing on [them]selves, so that the smaller community of Millennials is getting what they need out of everyday life.

This response only illustrates that Millennials are not solely Generation “Me” or “We,” but rather they try to be both. However, this participant does argue that Millennials do tend to over overestimate their ability to help the larger community, or “We”, and thus tend to become more focused on the self. Therefore, this participant still argues for Millennials’ tendency to be focused on oneself rather than the larger community; however, another Millennial within that same focus group argued against this by describing the communities he or she is involved within at Appalachian State University.

While I have yet to attend this particular club [on campus] I would identify with the online community [for the club] “Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation”.

¹⁹ This focus group set of questions is not included in the appendix as it wasn’t for my own research but rather solely for Dr. Reed; however, the focus group question I’m referring to is: “Some scholars have claimed that Millennials are more individualistic and self focused calling them “Generation Me”. Others have argued that Millennials are generally focused on a responsibility and connection to others labeling them as “Generation We”. What is your perspective on millennial inclination?” This was a part of the Focus group on Communities from Fall 2015 to Spring 2016 at Appalachian State University.

[That is a community] that I'm connected to on the internet but it conflicts with my [class schedule], which may speak to how much I value my involvement in that club [despite not being able to attend the on-campus meetings.] [However,] I would also say that the Appalachian State community, and I would even say the Boone community, [although] I'm not paying property tax, I [do] pay sales tax every time I go to a restaurant, so I consider myself a part of [that] community. I participate in community events like when they close down the street [such as], the bike and skateboard day in the summer and [related events]. I support those activities while I attend them. [I participate in the larger] communities around the [Boone], [and] around [Appalachian State University].

This Millennial not only describes an online community they belong to based on their self-interests, but also they describe how they are involved in the communities around the city and community they belong in as a whole. Thus this Millennial argues that it isn't solely Generation "Me" or "We", but rather, based on his or her own anecdotal involvement, a combination of both.

However, unlike other generations previously, Millennials are not only connected with the communities around them in their immediate community, but they are also heavily involved in their online communities. As one participant stated, "[Millennials] really like to be a part of online communities so [that they] can check in and out of [that community] on [their] own accord." Millennials connect themselves to online communities that both serve their personal interests and interests of the larger culture they are a part of, and thus have a strong presence on those communities, as well as the local communities. However, as the above comment states, Millennials enjoy being a part of online communities because they have the control over how much time and investment

they would like to give towards that community, but they can also choose to disengage that community at any point without many repercussions. Unlike a Church that may know most of its members, and when one doesn't show up for weeks at a time, that absent member is questioned about their whereabouts upon return, Millennials prefer not to have their motives for their absence to be questioned if they choose to disengage a community. This is only one reason that could contribute to the building factors as why Millennials may be leaving the Church, but also other communities that have attendance obligations, and it could explain the increase in communities that are extremely flexible and have no accountability over attendance.

This only gives us a glimpse into the types of communities that Millennials prefer to involve themselves within on a regular basis. So in my research, we also decided to ask them what a welcoming community would look like, not only in general, but specifically within the Church. We figured this could also give us some understanding about the possibility of them returning to the Church later in life or not.

One Millennial stated that "I think they all feel a sense of [community] if it's under a figure, under a pastor who [is] well-esteemed or well-written or famous." This response describes the perspective that regardless of the church, if the pastor is well respected by the congregation, it will ultimately lead to a sense of community amongst its members. Another Millennial focused on the worship as a source for community when they stated that, "The songs, everybody being together.... Sharing of joys, sorrows and meaning, [and] the songs and voices raised [to create] community." This illustrates between these two Millennials that community can be created through the leadership or the worship within a Church. However, if Millennials do not respect the leadership or do

not prefer the genre of music that some categorize as “worship,” this could ultimately have no effect on bringing them back to the Church.

One Millennial stated that, “[a Church in] its leadership, and its members that listen to understand [rather than] to respond. That, for me, is the most welcoming Church.” Again arises this idea of acceptance of diversity, because only in uniformity can there be no difference of opinion or lifestyle. Another stated that,

A welcoming Church for me is a Church that [gives the message], ‘I’m not [going] to talk to you about what we believe, who we are, and what we look like, [but rather] I’m going [to] show you who we are [as a Church].’

This again argues that Millennials respect communities that not only are accepting of all their members, but are also those who take action upon what they preach. This shows that Millennials don’t necessarily focus on what is being preached as much as they are focusing on what is being done by the religious institution and its community for the surrounding communities. If the Church is being exclusive, and refusing to help certain communities around it, especially those in which Millennials are heavily involved in, the chances of them returning or becoming involved in the Church are not likely.

One Millennial stated that, “I don’t think people feel like they need the church to have a sense of community anymore.” This statement alone I found to show the most significant shift in perspective with Millennials in comparison to previous generations. In the Silent Generations through even the Boomer Generation, Church was a source of community. Churches may be found in the center of neighborhoods, towns, or cities, and be idols of the idea of community. When people in previous generations thought of community, the Church was typically unified with that thought process, and typically connected to the sense of community everyone had. Whether they truly believed in the

religion or not, being a Christian and going to Church were an unspoken (and sometimes spoken) expectation from those in the local, and even sometimes national, community.

However, now, Millennials don't view the Church as being strongly connected to this sense of community that one must have to be successful. They view their online communities, their volunteer organizations, their social justice activists groups, their communities they have within their hobbies, and their religious communities as all being a part of the sense of community they describe. In a sense, across the generations, community used to be able to be clearly defined like a clear sheet of glass, however, as generations began to leave and disaffiliate from communities in which affiliation was an unspoken expectation, the sense of community began to look much more like a mosaic. Millennials bring together a variety of different communities that they affiliate with, each individual community appearing as a singular broken piece of glass, and they bind them together with their identity, interests, and passions into something that makes up their definition of true community. It isn't one community now that defines community, but rather a variety of communities that decide how community will be defined.

Millennials no longer view the Church as a necessary component to define community or to provide a sense of community. They may recognize that it doesn't provide community and a sense of community for those who choose to affiliate with the religion and be involved within it, but they do not view it as a requirement in order to have community. Therefore, Millennials define a welcoming community as being one that listens to understand their perspectives rather than to respond to them with their own perspective; one that follows through with its missions, goals, purposes, and messages, one that accepts all and doesn't not exclude others, and one that is authentic. This idea of authenticity permeates Millennials' definition of community, and thus it makes it our

most important topic when describing Millennials view of community, and the church. Community overall co-occurred 20 times with Authenticity, thus arguing strongly that Millennials highly value authenticity as a necessary component to community.

Authenticity

Authenticity was by far one of the most heavily weighted discussion topics in all of our focus groups. Authenticity was defined in our focus groups as sincerity, genuineness, transparency, or in the terms that the words spoken must match the actions done when determining if a religious or nonreligious institution or community is authentic. Authenticity is what Millennials seem to hold onto when determining the amount of involvement or time they should invest in a community, institution, or cause. If they view that the mission, and the core foundation of the thing, has value, genuineness, and sincerity in its purpose, they usually will invest a great amount of time, effort, and commitment into it as long as it aligns with their goals for their lives. If it doesn't align with them personally, they may still recognize the sincere weight of the mission an institution or community holds, but personally choose not to invest in it directly. Authenticity is the key to Millennials involvement in the Church, or their lack of involvement within the Church. As one Millennial stated,

I think [the Church's] efforts are more focused on [the] actual production of church itself, and not addressing the issue that maybe resides with Millennials and [how] we are lacking community, [how] we are lacking [acceptance], [and how] we are lacking more personal things [rather] than, 'oh, let's make a hip service!' [The Church needs to] address this need, and I think that is what a lot of churches are settling with – [the thought of], 'well, we need something [extra].' We need

music that will tend to the generation. We need younger people. We need better-looking people to [enhance the image of the Church]. It's more about what is going on in [the] Church itself and not so much [about] what is going on [within] society that the Church could address and meet Millennials where they are at, [rather than] trying to create something within the Church that seems more appealing to [Millennials]. The efforts to make a service more appealing I don't think should be the target at all. However, I think that is a lot of what the Church is trying to for [today]. It is like we need to make a more [hip Church]."

This Millennial described the situation with authenticity and the Church perfectly. The Church decided that its approach to the rising numbers in religious disaffiliation amongst young adults, and eventually Millennials, would be to create more "hip" worship experiences. This could appear as more "rock concert" like worship experiences, or even changing the word "service" to "experience" is a movement across churches to make it more relevant to Millennials and the younger generations. Worship leaders and pastors are wearing skinnier jeans, tighter clothes, more casual outfits, and "relevant" sermons to the lives of Millennials today. Churches have become more focused on the presentation of their services rather than the substance of what they are preaching, and rather than Millennials coming in flocks back to the Church, they are avoiding it like it's the plague due to its appearance that it lacks sincerity and authenticity. The Church has found that its approach to make its services, leaders, and sermons "modernized" and "relevant" to the lives of Millennials isn't as effective as they had originally hoped; however, they continue pursuing this goal hoping that it will work eventually in the light of the Megachurches that have arisen in the past decade across the United States and world. So, according to Millennials, what are attributes of a religious community that demonstrates

authenticity? One Millennial focused on what they labeled as the least in one's community and how one treats them.

The [most effective] way for authenticity to be showcased, for me, is how you treat the least people in your community. If you're authentic, I'm going to go to your church, walk [to a local] impoverished neighborhood, or [somewhere else] where I see your members, pastor, and leadership [being active in the community] that [gives the message] that, 'it is not just about [us], it is not just about our ideology, it is not even about our civic community, [rather] it is about [us] as people and as far as we can reach [others].'

According to this Millennial, the key identifier that a church or community is authentic is how they engage with the oppressed communities around them, the hurt, the needy, or, in their words, the least in the community. If they see a church that has no impact on the local hurting communities around it, they view it as a sign that the church is not truly acting in ways that are equivalent with what they are preaching on Sunday. If the Church preaches that one must feed the poor but lacks any actual effort to meet that need in its local community, is it really authentic and sincere in its mission, in its belief system, and in its purpose as a community?

Authenticity however isn't only determined by how strongly the Church's claims align with its actions, or how often they "practice what they preach." Authenticity is also defined by diversity and dialogue. As one Millennial stated, "If you're trying to be authentic, then the best way [to be authentic] is, whether it's religious or [something else], to have [an] open dialogue [with others.]" As mentioned previously, diversity, acceptance, and dialogue are important when determining the authenticity of an institution or community. Therefore, if Millennials encounter a community that lacks this

sort of “open dialogue,” diversity in its community, lacks a strong correlation between what is spoken and done, and lacks acceptance within its community, they will deem that the community is inauthentic and not worth investing in as a whole. It doesn't matter how “hip,” relevant, loud, or pretty it is on the outside, Millennials seem to be focusing on the substances that make up the community rather than how it looks to everyone else.

Authenticity seems to hold the final word over whether Millennials will invest time and value into an institution or community, and thus is the most important reason we found at not only preventing spiritual wounds from occurring, but also having the potential to bring the back. Authenticity suggests acceptance, diversity, community, and sincerity to a degree that excludes the possibility of exclusion, and thus spiritual wounds. According to the comments of Millennials, a welcoming and authentic community is not one that hates, nor excludes, nor rejects, and thus with those things absent, one cannot have spiritual wounds inflicted upon them by the Church or its community.

How can the Church address these issues?

After examining several areas that gained the most attention in our focus groups, it is important as a conclusion to address how the Church may address this exodus of Millennials from its pews, and this potential ultimatum that Millennials may not be turning to the Church or Christianity. The Church faces many obstacles as they attempt to address this issue of Millennials leaving the Church.

Cultural Christianity, Familiarity, the Image of the Church, and the perspective of Institutions that Millennials hold are only four of the obstacles the Church faces. We defined Cultural Christianity as the sense that parents have passed down their religious beliefs to their children, and thus they are still attending out of family tradition and

obligation, or fear of being ostracized from their family and community if they disaffiliate from the religious community. Familiarity was defined as the habit one may form in childhood of attending Church every week, and rather than disrupt a firmly established habitual behavior, they rather continue attending than to disaffiliate. These two issues describe two types of “Christians” that can be found within the Church and have not technically disaffiliated from the religion. As one Millennial stated,

I think upbringing definitely has a lot to do with [staying in the religion]. I think that group identification [has] a lot to do with it. I think that religious beliefs can be very influential, very structured within [the Church], [and] built within a person.

This is something the Church needs to address when they want to approach the topic of authenticity within the members of the community – authenticity cannot be found or established if the very members of a community are apathetic and complacent towards the goals and mission of the community. Thus the Church must address the issue of apathy and complacency within its immediate community before trying to reach out to those who have left the Church, because it will demonstrate to Millennials and others that they hold their communities accountable to following the doctrine they proclaim, and it will hold their communities accountable to also act upon what they preach, rather than having false contentment that they attended Church on Sunday, and going forth to do nothing in response to what they heard in the message that day.

We asked Millennials in our focus group²⁰ why they think some Millennials have stayed within the Church. One responded with the reasons why Millennials either leave or stay by stating that,

I think you either [stay] true to those [religious beliefs] and you stay [within the religion], [and] you try not to change [your beliefs] given the new ideas that you're being presented with [or] you can do the opposite and you can run from [those beliefs] as far away as you can get.

As mentioned previously, Cultural Christianity can become a reason, along with Familiarity, for why Millennials may stay within the Church. Cultural Christianity co-occurred with Reasons to Stay within the Church 13 times, and Familiarity co-occurred with Reasons to Stay in the Church 10 times. The Millennial's statement above also argues that he or she holds the belief that if one remains in the religious tradition that they grew up with, it implies that they are closed-minded towards new ideas. This perspective of closed-mindedness within the Church has mainly arisen as problems between the LGBTQ+ communities, Race communities, Abortion communities, and communities that advocate for the rights of Women have arisen over the past decade and longer, and become highly covered by media outlets. Thus, the Church has gained the image of being closed-minded when it refuses to accept without conditions certain people into its community. However, this problem falls both upon the shoulders of the Church and Millennials, as the Church cannot strip itself of all its regulations for moral behavior in order to be appealing to Millennials, and Millennials cannot seek to undermine the foundation of the Church as a way of progression and to make it seem to be the only path in which the Church can take in order to bring them back.

²⁰ Question Number 9 in Fall 2016 Focus Group Questions, Appendix III

Another Millennial focused on the cultural relevance of remaining involved in Church as the reason why some Millennials stay. They stated that,

If you're religious, you [choose to] remain religious, [but only if] it is culturally relevant...you can see [if] your religion [is becoming] outdated, [and something] that people don't [participate in] anymore. Worldview is extremely important [to Millennials]; some Millennials try to weave their worldview [into their] religion, [but] some abandon it entirely.

Worldviews have become an important topic amongst Millennials, and one's worldview can determine whether a community they remain affiliated with or used to be affiliated with is still relevant to culture and to themselves personally. If a Millennial determines that a community, such as the Church, is no longer relevant to their culture, or necessary for a sense of community, then they may continue to disaffiliate. However, if the Church pursues issues, and becomes involved within the communities that Millennials are passionate about, this may allow the Church to appear more relevant to Millennials, thus Millennials will eventually re-adopt religious affiliation and Church attendance into their worldview as something that is both important and relevant to their lives.

One thing, according to a Millennial participant in our focus group, that remains to be a strength of the Church is its educational programs that it offers with childcare. Some Millennials and those that belong to Generation X remained religiously affiliated when their children were young because the Church offers free childcare to parents as they begin to grow their family. One Millennial stated that,

In general, I always think that the way to get young people into a church is to have a good religious educational program for children, [because] it invites young families to come. Growing up in the church, when you [develop] a stronger bond

with the people who you've grown up [around], [thus] you're more likely to enjoy certain aspects of [the] church

When the Church offers communal programs that provide resources to young families and adults, this will bring families and their children into the Church, and it will allow the Church to begin to create a community around these individuals so that they may decide being involved in the Church is worth their time and commitment in their lives. However, if the Church wants to attract Millennials who do not have children, it may be best that the Church offers programs that educate and teach Millennials not only how to become successful, and financially stable, adults, but also how to become religiously involved in their community. While this is not a guaranteed way to address this issue, it may provide an opportunity to understand Millennials' passions, worldviews, and perspectives about the world around them and the Church, and may allow them to become involved in these pursuits.

As a Millennial, and I do hold a Christian bias, I believe that the Church can address these issues by reevaluating how it is approaching Millennials as a whole. The Church needs to be focused on its image, and what it is truly pursuing. It needs to be holding its members accountable to the scriptures and theological principles it teaches, while also being actively involved in the communities around it. It must be accepting of people, and understanding when there is a difference in opinion, and must not exclude people in ways that could harm them or the Church. The Church, however, cannot reduce itself to be another institution that only tries to shape itself into what Millennials want, but rather must reevaluate itself and its own goals so that it doesn't appear as just another institutional advertisement, but rather as a cause that the Millennials can stand behind even if they disagree on some theological issues within its doctrine. The Church must

respond in such a way that allows for change, and creates a space for Millennials to not only become involved, but to use their talents and capabilities to help the Church thrive. By engaging Millennials where they are, as so many Millennials in this thesis have stated, they can show themselves to be authentic in their pursuits, welcoming in their approach, and accepting in their viewpoints so that the Church can reappear as a relevant source of community for Millennials.

Conclusion

So how do our qualitative findings parallel with the quantitative conclusions of the major research groups such as Pew Report, Pew Research Center, ARIS, and the Public Religion Research Institute?

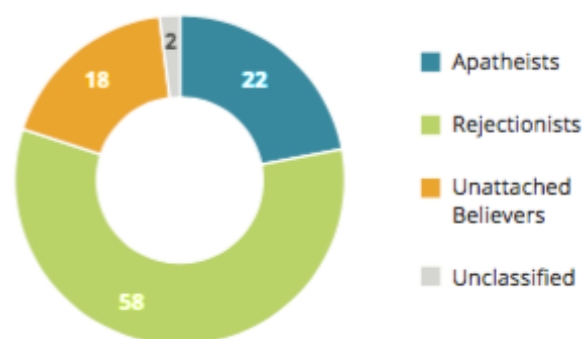
Our qualitative research findings argue that Millennials are leaving due to a disagreement in theological doctrine, because they view the institution of the Church as being inauthentic, too political, too powerful, hypocritical, too judgmental, and too exclusive. They do not view the Church as welcoming, accepting, or as a necessary source of community.

Throughout our focus groups in their discussions of exclusions, it paralleled the Public Religion Research

Institute's research that Millennials are leaving the Church are following into the "Rejectionists" or "Apatheists" category (Jones, Cox, Cooper, & Lienesch, 2016, 13).

According to PRRI, there are three subgroups within the religiously unaffiliated:

FIGURE 8. Three Subgroups Within the Religiously Unaffiliated



PRRI/RNS August 2016 Survey.

Apathesists, Rejectionists, and Unattached Believers. They defined “Rejectionists” as holding the view that religion is not important to them personally, and that religion does more harm than good. “Apatheists” hold the view that religion is not important to them personally, but that it is more socially helpful than harmful. Of those two groups, 83% of Rejectionists and 76% of Apatheists rarely if ever attend worship services. Unattached Believers hold the view that religion is important to them personally, however that only makes up only 18% of the religiously unaffiliated, and 61% of them state that they attend worship services a few times a year. According to PRRI, 58% of the religiously unaffiliated are Rejectionists, and 22% are Apatheists. They found that only 3% of Rejectionists and 4% of Apatheists are looking for religion, unlike the Unattached Believers in which 22% state they are looking for a religion.

According to our findings and the responses by our participants, most of our participants appear to be within the category of Apatheists or Unattached believers, while some may be within the Rejectionists category. According to PRRI, 53% of all the religiously unaffiliated Unattached Believers live in the South compared to 29% of Rejectionists, and 28% of Apatheists. This may explain why our findings appear to lack participants that could fall within the Rejectionist category, because most of that category does not live in the South where this research was conducted. This is a confound to our research, as it only studies Southern Millennials, and specifically those that attend Appalachian State University. However, this demonstrates that a majority of those that participated in our focus groups fell into the category of the religiously unaffiliated.

Millennials strongly view that having a welcoming community is important, one that accepts all groups from different backgrounds and perspectives, and thus isn't exclusively inclusive. This also illustrates the biggest conflict between Millennials and

the Church as it argues for why Millennials have been leaving the Church due to their disagreements on the treatment of LGBTQ+ community, on politics, scripture, and other social justice issues, such as abortion, divorce, and issues relating to women's rights. If the Church appears to be exclusive against these communities, it ultimately leads Millennials to reject the institution of the Church, and label it as judgmental, unwelcoming, harmful, exclusive, and closed-minded.

Most of the Millennials in our focus groups identified themselves as either having left the Church, still being involved within the church, still within the Church but is cynical about the Church, or never was within the Church, but knows others who have left. While our study is limited in being able to generalize, we believe that our findings, and our the topics we researched, paralleled the quantitative and generalizable findings of the major research groups studying these topics and trends as well. Thus this added a qualitative and personal approach to the quantitative data conducted by these research groups, and we found that our results demonstrated the same opinions that were being expressed within their polls as a whole.

Based on our findings, and the quantitative results from the major research groups reviewed in the Literature Review, I conclude that I don't think Millennials will ultimately return to the Church. It seems that a chasm has grown in depth between Millennials and the Church, one that the Church may not be able to bridge, or Millennials may not wish to attempt to bridge in the future. Millennials have found other communities they wish to invest their time in more consistently, and have found other ways to have a spiritual life without the need to attend Church. Millennials rather have the option to sleep in on a Sunday than attend Church, which only argues that Millennials don't view it as an institution that is worth their time and their sacrifice of their sleep if

they have to work long hours. Millennials are heavily involved in a variety of communities, and considering they are waiting until their upper 20s to early 30s to get married and start a family, unlike previous generations, it may suggest that they may not ever return. By one's late 20s and early 30s, they've strongly established their worldviews, thus when they get married and begin to have kids, they may not view the Church as an adequate source of moral education for their children, or an effective use of their time when they are weighing to what invest in during their lives.

Millennials view that the Church and religion in general causes more harm than good, and is exclusive in who they include within their communities. With Millennials being heavily involved in politics and social justice issues that relate to the excluded communities, and the unlikelyhood of the Church's approach to these issues changing, it may only cause more Millennials to decide to leave and not return. Thus our conclusion is that as we examine and watch the trend of Millennial religious affiliation, and even the religious affiliation trends of the upcoming generation behind the Millennials, we predict that the percentage of Millennials and individuals who are religiously unaffiliated will only increase at a steady incline unless the Church as a drastic change in its approach of this generation that is effective.

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Appendix I: Consent Form

Reasons Millennials are Leaving the Church

Principal Investigator: Sarah Vaughn

Department: Philosophy and Religion

Contact Information: vaughnsm@appstate.edu

Consent to Participate in Research *Information to Consider About this Research*

I agree to participate in a focus group(s) for this research about Reasons Millennials are Leaving the Church. The focus group(s) will take place on Appalachian State University Campus for 2 hours. I understand that the focus group will include questions about religious issues related to the why Millennials are leaving the Church.

I understand that there are no foreseeable risks associated with my participation. I also know that this study may aid in the understanding of millennial responses to the movement away from the Church and the potential for religious change in the United States.

During the course of the focus group discussions, I will not mention any personal or private, identifiable information (such as names) of individuals who are not participating in the focus group. In addition, I agree that all conversations which take place in the focus group should not be discussed with anyone outside of the focus group and its participants. I likewise will not share any personal anecdotes about myself or anyone else that is of a sensitive nature.

I understand that the focus group(s) will be audio recorded and may be published. I understand that the audio recordings of my comments may be kept in the possession of the Primary Researcher if I sign the authorization below.

I give Sarah Vaughn, an undergraduate researcher, ownership of the tapes, transcripts, recordings and/or photographs from the interview(s) he or members of his research team conducts with me and understand that tapes and transcripts will be kept in the researchers' possession. I understand that information or quotations from tapes and/or transcripts may be published and/or presented at academic conferences. I understand I will not receive compensation for the interview.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can end it at any time without consequence. I also understand that I do not have to answer any questions and can end the interview at any time with no consequences. I confirm I am at least 18 years of age.

If I have questions about this research project, I can call Sarah Vaughn at (704) 497-0377 or by email at vaughnsm@appstate.edu or the Appalachian Institutional Review Board Administrator at 828-262-2130 (days), through email at irb@appstate.edu or at

Appalachian State University, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, IRB
Administrator, Boone, NC 28608.

This research project has been approved on _____(date) by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Appalachian State University. This approval will expire on [Expiration Date] unless the IRB renews the approval of this research.

____ I request that my name **not** be used in connection with tapes, transcripts, photographs or publications resulting from this focus group.

____ I request that my name **be used** in connection with tapes, transcripts, photographs or publications resulting from this focus group.

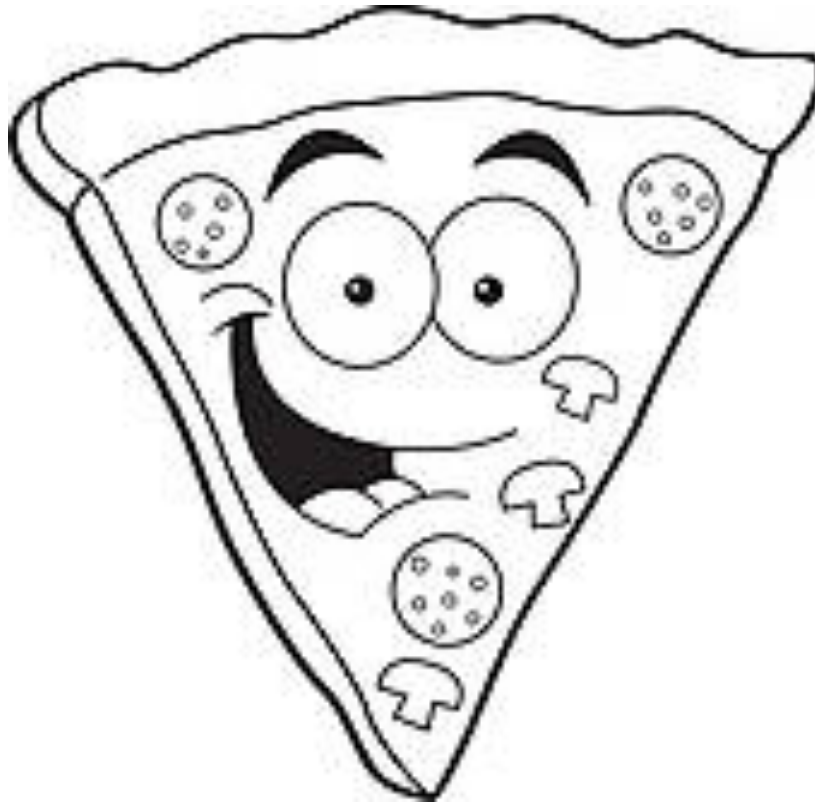
By signing this form, I acknowledge that I have read this form, had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers, and want to participate. I understand I can keep a copy for my records.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix II: Flyer



WOULD YOU LIKE FREE PIZZA TONIGHT!?

**Come to Room 110 in I.G. Greer, the student lounge, at 4pm
and participate in our focus group on the topic of
“Reasons Millennials are Leaving the Church”!**

**The group tonight will be between last about 2 hours as we will
be asking questions in relation to authenticity within the
Church, and how exclusion of others is affecting Millennial
decisions to leave or stay in the Church.**

**WE WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO JOIN US TONIGHT FOR
OUR FOCUS GROUP!**

Appendix III: Focus Group Questions

Focus Group: What are the reasons Millennials are leaving the Church?

Fall 2016 Semester

Sarah Vaughn, Randall Reed

IRB Number: 16-0334

Introduction: We are researching millennial responses to why Millennials are leaving the Church. In our conversation today, we want to explore what you think about Christian communities and the issue of exclusion, and the topic of authenticity. Please share your opinions as forthrightly as possible. Please know that your identity will be kept confidential. To that end, please refrain from personal stories or anecdotes that might personally identify you and please refer to each other by your number. If you mess up, don't worry, we will fix it in the transcript, but try your best. Are there any questions before we begin?

1. Some people have witnessed people close to them being excluded from the church and related Christian communities for issues such as sexual orientation, divorce, having an abortion, etc. What are situations that you have witnessed, heard about, or read about where the church has excluded someone from the community?
2. How did these exclusions affect your view of Christianity and your decision to stay or leave the Church?
3. Some Millennials claim that the Church is disconnected and irrelevant to today's culture, and thus cannot relate to their generation in a meaningful way. Do you agree with this statement? How would you describe the relationship that the Church has with Millennials today?
4. How does the Church's attitudes towards contemporary issues (such as homosexuality, sex before marriage, political views, etc.) affect Millennials' decisions to leave the Church?
5. Many Millennials feel that the church is lacking authenticity, and they feel like they are being sold on something. In regards to the Church, some feel as though the Church wants them to check the box and say the sinner's prayer and be a pre-packaged Christian. Do you agree? What does authenticity mean to you?
6. How does the Church lack authenticity? How can the Church be more authentic?
7. Some Millennials find a Church community to be authentic in their interpretation of scripture, other Millennials find authenticity in the sermons of the Pastor, while yet others find authenticity within the community. What part of the Church, in your opinion, is the most important when determining if the Church is authentic, and why?
8. Some Millennials leave the Church because of a lack of authenticity, while others may leave due to the Church "trying too hard" to be authentic. How do you think this issue of authenticity is affecting the image of the Church?
9. Many Millennials continue to attend church. Why do you think that is?
10. What would a welcoming church look like?
11. The church is one institution among several others in the American system like the government, business, education and labor unions. How do you think

Millennials feel about institutions in general? Do Millennials favor or are critical of some institutions over others? What are they and why?

Thank you for participating in our focus group!

**Focus Group: Wild Goose Festival
Summer 2015**

**Randall Reed, Sarah Vaughn, Alaina Doyle
IRB Number: 15-0321 and 14-0212**

Introduction: We are researching millennial responses to a movement called the Emerging Church. Part of project is to explore millennial feelings about the church. Millennials are dropping out of institutionalized churches in numbers never seen before. In our conversation today we want to explore what you think are the problems with the church today and what are the things you think they are doing right. Please share your opinions as forthrightly as possible. Please know that your identity will be kept confidential. To that end please refrain from personal stories or anecdotes that might personally identify you and please refer to each other by your number. If you mess up, don't worry we'll fix it in the transcript, but try your best. Are there any questions before we begin?

Definition: The Church in all of these questions refers to the universal Church (meaning the church generally).

1. Some Millennials, perhaps like you, are leaving or have left the church. What do you think is driving them away?
2. Other Millennials, perhaps like you, have remained in the church. Why do you think they stay?
3. Many have criticized the church for being hypocritical. Some say the church is fake and ignores the real issues in the world. Others think the church is sincere but has some flawed people in it. What's your view of this?
4. Stories of people who have been rejected by the church are often in the news. Have you heard stories of people who felt turned away by a Church and how did this make you feel about church?
5. Some people say the problem with the church today is a lack authenticity, genuineness or being real. What do you think of this statement? How important is authenticity to your religious experience? What could churches do to be more authentic?
6. Some churches are trying new forms of worship, with a more modern bent. They include a more relaxed atmosphere, services that include discussion, different forms of liturgy from allowing for more art and creativity during the service. What do you think about such innovations?
7. Some critics say the church is too political and it should have no role in political issues. Some church leaders argue they are not political enough and should take a stand for anything they believe the Bible speaks to. Other leaders say the church should be political, but it has been political about the wrong things like gay

- marriage and abortion instead of taking care of the poor and social justice issues.
What are your feelings about the role of the church in politics?
8. Why did you choose to come to a festival rather than a other kinds of experience (concert, conferences, church retreats, etc)?
 9. What feelings do festivals give you as opposed to other musical or religiously oriented experiences?
 10. How does the bodily experience of the festival (camping, staying in one place for several days, eating with other festival goers) contribute or detract from the experience for you?
 11. Some have suggested there is a spiritual aspect to festivals, is that true for you? How?

Moderator: Thank you for your participation today, we appreciate you taking the time to share your opinion with us. Thank you again.

Appendix IV: IRB Exemption**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Office of Research Protections ASU Box 32068
Boone, NC 28608 828.262.2692

Web site: <http://researchprotections.appstate.edu> Email: irb@appstate.edu
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #00001076

To: Sarah Vaughn
Philosophy & Religion 8208 Lake Providence Dr. Weddington, NC, 28104
CAMPUS EMAIL

From: Monica Molina, IRB Associate Administrator **Date:** 9/15/2016
RE: Notice of IRB Exemption

STUDY #: 16-0334

STUDY TITLE: Spiritual Wounds and how they have affected Millennial's view of the church and their decision to stay or leave.

Exemption Category: (2) Anonymous Educational Tests; Surveys, Interviews or Observations

This study involves minimal risk and meets the exemption category cited above. In accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b) and University policy and procedures, the research activities described in the study materials are exempt from further IRB review.

All approved documents for this study, including consent forms, can be accessed by logging into IRBIS. Use the following directions to access approved study documents.

1. Log into IRBIS
2. Click "Home" on the top toolbar
3. Click "My Studies" under the heading "All My Studies"
4. Click on the IRB number for the study you wish to access
5. Click on the reference ID for your submission
6. Click "Attachments" on the left-hand side toolbar
7. Click on the appropriate documents you wish to download

Study Change: Proposed changes to the study require further IRB review when the change involves:

an external funding source,
the potential for a conflict of interest,
a change in location of the research (i.e., country, school system, off site location),
the contact information for the Principal Investigator,
the addition of non-Appalachian State University faculty, staff, or students to the research team, or
the basis for the determination of exemption. Standard Operating Procedure #9 cites examples of changes which affect the basis of the determination of exemption on page 3.

page 1 of 2

Investigator Responsibilities: All individuals engaged in research with human participants are responsible for compliance with University policies and procedures, and IRB determinations. The Principal Investigator (PI), or Faculty Advisor if the PI is a student, is ultimately responsible for ensuring the protection of research participants; conducting sound ethical research that complies with federal regulations, University policy and procedures; and maintaining study records. The PI should review the IRB's list of PI responsibilities.

To Close the Study: When research procedures with human participants are completed, please send the Request for Closure of IRB Review form to irb@appstate.edu.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Protections Office at (828) 262-2692 (Robin).

Best wishes with your research.

Websites for Information Cited Above

Note: If the link does not work, please copy and paste into your browser, or visit <https://researchprotections.appstate.edu/human-subjects>.

1. Standard Operating Procedure #9:

<http://researchprotections.appstate.edu/sites/researchprotections.appstate.edu/files/IRB20SOP920Exempt%20Review%20Determination.pdf>

2. PI responsibilities:

<http://researchprotections.appstate.edu/sites/researchprotections.appstate.edu/files/PI20Responsibilities.pdf> 3. IRB forms: <http://researchprotections.appstate.edu/human-subjects/irb-forms>

CC:

Randall Reed, Philosophy & Religion

Appendix V: Comparison Essay on the differences between the Religious Landscapes of France and the United States

In this essay, I will argue that secularism may be a cause into the rising rates of the religiously unaffiliated group in the United States and France. I will spend this paper analyzing several articles and books that not only discuss the topic of Millennials leaving the Church, and the religious demographic in France and the United States, but also how each nation's interpretation of secularism has resulted in higher rates of religious disaffiliation in both nations, and higher demands for a strong governmental state and national unity.

Millennials are leaving the Church at an increasing rate, and 32% of Millennials in the United States are already religious disaffiliated (Lugo, et al. 2012, 10). According to Pew Report in their study "*Nones on the Rise*," (2012) 88% of the religiously unaffiliated are not looking to be religiously affiliated with any religion (10). Trends that are being predicted by Pew Report, and other research organizations, show that between 1972 and 2010, the "None" category, or those whom identify being religious unaffiliated, has grown 11% (7% to 18%) across the general population in the United States (14). Of Millennials in the United States, 30% of the Older Millennials and 34% of the Younger Millennials identify as being religiously unaffiliated as of 2012 (16).

France has instigated policies against religion, one including that one that is Muslim cannot wear a headscarf in public places, especially schools, because it shows religious affiliation (Scott, 2007, 5). According to Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project's interactive global religious demography chart (Templeton Global

Religious Futures Project, France)²¹, as of 2010 in France, 63% of their population was Christian, 7.5% were Muslim, and 28% were religiously unaffiliated (Demographics France, 2010). In a decade²², the Christian population will decrease to 58.1%, the Muslim population will increase to 8.3%, and the religiously unaffiliated will increase to 31.9% (Demographics France, 2020). By 2050, Pew Report predicts that the religious demographic of France will be 43.1% Christian, 10.9% Muslim, and 44.1% religiously unaffiliated (Demographics France, 2050). And according to their religious restrictions chart, France scored high in social hostility towards religious expression (5.1 index score) and moderate (4.2 index score) on governmental restrictions index score on religious expression (However, they are .03 index points away from being indicated as high as of 2013) (Religious Restrictions section, 2013). According to Pew Report's article "*The Global Religious Landscape*," (2012) they reinforce these statistics by demonstrating that as of 2010, 63% of France's population is Christian, and 28% of its population is religiously unaffiliated (Cooperman , et al., 2012, 46)

In comparison to the United States in this chart, 78.3% are Christians, below 1% across all other religions, and 16.4% are religiously unaffiliated as of 2010 (Demographics U.S., 2010). By 2020, Christians decrease to 75.5%, Muslims increase to 1.1%, and the religiously unaffiliated grows to 18.6% (Demographics U.S., 2020). By 2050, Christians are expected to decrease to 66.4%, Muslims to increase to 2.1%, and the religiously unaffiliated to 25.6% (Demographics U.S., 2050). An important point to

²¹ Source website as seen in References:

http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/france#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010&ion_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2013. All in-text citations will refer to the year and country I am using within the chart.

²² Chart increases by decades up to 2050, and predicts the religious demographic of the nation being analyzed.

notice however in the comparison to the religious demographics of France and the United States is the difference in population size. The United States stands at 310,380,000 people, and France at 62,790,000 people as of 2010, and by 2050 the United States is predicted to be around 394,000,000, and France at 69,000,000. Therefore, the higher growth rate of the unaffiliated by 2050 in France to 44.1% versus the 25.6% in the United States, it can be argued that it also represents a lower population rate in France than in the United States, thus explains the reason why more of France's religious makeup is reported to be unaffiliated (Compare States Section between United States and France, 2010). In Pew Report's Article, "*The Global Religious Landscape*," (2012) they stated that 7% of the religiously unaffiliated in France and 27% of the religiously unaffiliated in the United States state that they attend worship services at least once a year. This only argues that the religiously unaffiliated in both nations rarely even seek religious communities by their lack of attendance to worship services (24).

In the Religious Demographic chart data explorer tool, the Worldwide population religious demographic predictions show that as of 2010 there were 520,120,000 Christians, 457,950,000 Muslims, and 276,690,000 religiously unaffiliated in the age group of 15-29 (Worldwide Data Explorer, 2010). However, unlike the United States and France (and similarly, the Western nations) where the religiously unaffiliated are predicted to increase within the nation by 2050, in the worldwide predictions, they are expected to decrease from 276,690,000 to 199,860,000 by 2050, and Christianity is predicted to grow to 611,580,000, and Islam is predicted to surpass Christianity at 620,130,000. Based on these predictions, the religiously unaffiliated will decrease on the worldwide scale, but increase within the western nations. In Pew Report's article, "*The Global Religious Landscape*," (2012) they stated that the top 10 countries with a high

religiously unaffiliated population are China (52.2%), Japan (57%), the United States (16.4%), Vietnam (29.6%), Russia (16.2%), South Korea (46.4%), Germany (24.7%), France (28%), North Korea (71.3%), and Brazil (7.9%) (25).²³

While there is a difference in population between the two nations (noted two paragraphs above), it is still important to recognize the higher rate of religiously unaffiliated in France versus the United States, and wonder if the religious demographic of France, and the similar Western Countries, are a future prediction of what the United States will look like going forward.

The values that each nation holds can also attribute to why their religiously unaffiliated populations are growing and their religious populations are decreasing,

specifically within the Western nations. In Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project's article, "*The American-Western European Values Gap*," (2011) they show that 58% of the United States believe they should have the freedom to "pursue life's goals without state interference," and 35% believe that the "State [should] guarantee nobody is in need." In comparison, we see the statistics reverse when looking at France, as 36% of France's population believe they should have "the freedom to pursue life's goals without

Views of Individualism and the Role of the State

	<i>Which is more important?</i>		
	Freedom to pursue life's goals without state interference	State guarantees nobody is in need	DK
	%	%	%
U.S.	58	35	7
Britain	38	55	7
Germany	36	62	2
France	36	64	0
Spain	30	67	3

Success in life is determined by forces outside our control

	Agree	Disagree	DK
	%	%	%
U.S.	36	62	3
Britain	41	55	4
Spain	50	47	3
France	57	43	0
Germany	72	27	1

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q15a & Q61.

²³ In descending order from the nation with the greatest population to the nation with the least population

state interference,” and 64% believe that “the state [should] guarantee nobody is in need.” In the comparison on success, 62% of those in the United States believe that success “is determined by forces outside our control,” while 57% of France believed that success is mainly “determined by forces outside our control.” (Kohut, Wike, Horowitz, Poushter, & Barker, 2011, 1, 7) Other than Britain in the success statistic, most Western nations surveyed above show a difference in opinion on their views of individualism and the state. 50% of the United States believes that Religion is very important, compared to 13% that view Religion as very important in France (8). 46% of the United States believe morality is not contingent on a belief in God, compared to 85% in France that hold this view. The United States is split when being asked, “What do you consider yourself first?” with the choices were being a Christian or their nationality (46% for each answer), compared to France in which 90% of its population consider themselves French first, and Christian²⁴ second²⁵ (10). These statistics suggest that the idea of nationalism is understood either differently between the United States and France, or France places a higher emphasis on nationality, and the United States emphasizes it in the sense that it is only a part of one’s identity, but not necessarily the most important part.

One of the most significant differences between the United States and France in their approach towards religiosity and individualism is found within their definitions of *secularism*. According to a book review on the book by Ahmet Kuru, “*Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*,” Kilinc identifies the two types of trends that Kuru argues conflict with one another in secular states:

²⁴ This actually changed between 2006 and 2011. In 2006, 14% of France’s population identified as viewing themselves as a Christian first, compared to 2011 where only 8% identified such (Kohut, Wike, Horowitz, Poushter, & Barker, 2011, 13)

²⁵ This research question was asked, according to Pew Research Center, to those that identified as being Christian *only*.

assertive and passive secularism. Kilinic states that Kuru argues that passive secularism allows for religion to be present in public spaces, while assertive secularism excludes religion from the public sphere and confines it to the private sphere²⁶ (Kilinc & Kuru, 2009).

In France, the law that prohibits public signs of religious affiliation in public schools is said to defend the “laïcité,” or secularism. According to those that supported this law, it was to maintain the unity of the social body of the nation, and the future of the nation (Scott, 2007, 90). The United States holds the view that to keep a separation of Church and State, and to remain in this state of neutrality towards religion, one must respect everyone’s individual choice for which religion to follow, and that neutrality could be maintained by recognizing the diversity in religious beliefs in its population rather than excluding religion. However, even with this perspective offered when coming against France’s law, it could not outweigh the nation’s sense of nationality, and its perspective that one’s nationality is the most important aspect of their identity (90). National unity is viewed as uniformity to France, while unity and neutrality is viewed as diversity to the United States. France made the dividing line between the Secular and the Religious, the political and the religious, and the public and the private very clear to its citizens – when one is in public, he or she is a citizen of France before any private identity they may hold (91).

Scott describes that in the United States Constitution, it states in its First Amendment, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This illustrates the goals of those that came to the

²⁶ Pages 11-14 in Ahmet Kuru’s book, “*Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*,”

United States to flee from religious persecution, and demonstrates that United States' stance that religious diversity is favored above religious uniformity, and that the government shall not interfere with one's religious identities in the public or private sphere (91). Essentially the U.S. Government removes itself from deciding whether a religion shall be expressed publically and/or privately, and thus keeps itself neutral, and provides a sense of national unity through the understood principle that diversity is the pathway to secularism. According to Scott,

In France, separation was intended to secure the allegiance of individuals to the republic and so break the political power of the Catholic Church. There the state claimed the undivided loyalty of citizens to the nation, and that meant relegating to the private sphere the claims of religious communities. This was expressed as state protection of individuals from the claims of religion. In France, the state protects individuals from religion; in America, religions are protected from the state and the state from religion. But in both cases, the terrain of politics is meant to be free of religious influence; it is considered essential to the republican democracy that religion is a private affair (91-92).

While France and the United States may have different approaches towards achieving secularism, or separation of religion and the state, they both aim at the same goal as Scott described – the state is supposed to be free of religious influence, and thus implies that religion must remain private. This pursuit of secularism is causing an uprising amongst certain religious groups that “demand” that their religious institutions be recognized by the state, and thus they view secularism as an obstacle towards their religious goals. As Scott described, this has lead to Christian fundamentalists in the United States to demand that the state returns to its “original” roots of the founding fathers, and become, once

again, a “religious state.” In the context of the United States, Christian fundamentalists aim to show that, as Scott argues, the “constitution is rooted not in Enlightenment universalism but in Christian revelation,” (92).

The United States argues that the French’s approach with assertive secularism will cause intolerance and discrimination amongst its people; however, France argues that the United States’ approach with passive secularism is allowing the evangelical Christians to gain political strength, and only argues the need for a more assertive secular state than a passive one (93). Scott stated that, “if Christian moralism, presented as revealed truth, is allowed to dictate standards of behavior for everyone, if as a result the right-to-life trumps the right-to-choose, they say, then democracy as we have known it is lost,” (93).

Scott argues that secularism in both history and principle is taken to be “a sign of modernity, the opening to democracy, the triumph of reason and science over superstition, sentiment, and unquestioned belief,” (95). In order to achieve this sense of modernity through secularism, the state must suppress or privatize religion, because it is viewed to represent irrationality, and thus is viewed as an obstacle of debate and discussion, according to Scott (95).

This discussion on secularism is important because it could explain why there are such significant differences between France’s and the United States’ views on nationalism and secularism, and why their religious disaffiliation rates are significantly different not just as of 2010, but also as of 2050. The United States holds a view that the Church and State should be separate; however, it holds the view that this should occur through passive secularism so that the state and the church are separated without influencing each other or restricting one another. France seeks to allow the state to

restrict and control religion in such a way that keeps it private and so that it doesn't influence its citizens beyond the private sphere. France reveres the idea of uniformity amongst its citizens and thus allows for complete loyalty to the nation over any other system of beliefs or powers. The United States reveres the idea of diversity so that no one system of beliefs can control another, but all can live in relative harmony with one another to create a unified population. France approaches religion as though it is an oppressor, and as Scott (2007) demonstrates, France intends to protect its citizens from the influence of religion through protection and supervision of the state. Americans hold the view that neither religion nor the state should hold that much power when trying to protect its citizens if it results in limiting one's overall freedom.

According to the Global Religious Futures interactive online project that predicts the future of religion globally (Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, France and the United States), as discussed earlier, of the United States' population, as of 2010, there were 50,980,000 religiously unaffiliated individuals; it is predicted to grow to 100,860,000 by 2050 in the United States. In France, as of 2010, there were 17,580,000 religiously unaffiliated individuals; it is predicted to grow to 30,570,000 by 2050.

According to this demographic chart, the U.S. population grows by a percentage of 0.9%, and France by 0.6%, and thus the United States religiously unaffiliated population group is predicted to double (a factor of 1.9), and France to nearly double (a factor of 1.7).

While 2050 suggests that 44.1% of France will be religiously unaffiliated, which definitely can be argued as being a direct effect to the aggressive secularism methods of France, and only 25.6% of the United States population will be religiously unaffiliated by

2050, the United States religiously unaffiliated population will outnumber France's general population.²⁷

With this in mind, it doesn't seem like either nation's approach to secularism is ultimately causing more of a drastic "leaving religion" effect; however, the United States religiously unaffiliated population will be growing more significantly than France's by 2050, and thus it could be suggested that while the United States' passive secularism allows for diversity without state intervention, it could be leading others away from religion as a whole as they view it as something that restricts their freedom. In France, there may eventually be a resistance to the national unity they profess and the aggressive secularism they instigate, because it may provide grounds for religious groups to feel oppressed and rebel against the state rather than cohabit and not interfere with the state. Secularism ultimately, expressed in different ways by these two nations, leads to higher rates in religious disaffiliation in both nations, whether due to religious privatization under the threat of persecution (France), or by religious privatization by the choice to separate religion's influence on state policies. Regardless, both pursuits have lead their nations to assume that secularism is the opponent to religion, and thus if one (secularism) wants to thrive, it must suppress, whether aggressively or passively, religious influence on politics and the state.

After looking at these findings, the United States and France have different approaches to addressing religion, and both are leading to higher rates in religious disaffiliation in their nations. While France might be effective in the outward expression of nationalism over religiosity, the United States is effective in limiting the power

²⁷ As of 2010, France's population was 62,790,000, and the United States religiously unaffiliated population was 50,980,000.

religion has over other areas in one's life by making diversity and balance seem more attractive – leading one to limit the importance of religion, and place the interests of the state ultimately above all else.

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